Occult Tendencies in Contemporary art: The Case of Benoît Pype
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Everything starts with a single drop of molten metal, in this case tin and lead, released into cold water. Instant reaction: the metal freezes, adopting a variety of arbitrary shapes and forms. *Chutes libres* (2013) – literally “free fall” – by French artist Benoît Pype (Fig. 1), is modelled upon an occult practice known as molybdomancy, a divination technique using molten lead and cold water. Pype’s reference to this technique is twofold: firstly, in a performance for the Lyon Biennial of 2013, performers predicted the future of spectators at Pype’s request; secondly the remnants of this technique, the objects themselves, became small sculptures of about one centimeter high.

Fig. 1 Benoît Pype, *Chutes Libres*, 2013 (Photo: © Fondation François Schneider / Raoul Ermel).
Molybdomancy can be found under different names in different cultures. Known as *Kṣif* in the Arabic world and *Bleigiessen* in the Germanic tradition, it remains the same in practice. The idea is to use a diffusible material that freezes in a seemingly random pattern in order to access the time and space continuum. Molybdomancy uses lead where ceromancy utilizes wax and oomancy uses eggs.¹

Through this direct appropriation of molybdomancy, Pype explicitly chose to present what can be referred to as an occult practice in the 12th Lyon Biennial of 2013. For the purpose of this article, we will rely on Antoine Faivre’s definition of the occult, which he considers a set of practices, which aims to affect or influence parts of the entire universe, both visible and invisible. For this prominent scholar, it therefore falls under the technical aspect of Western Esotericism.² It includes practices such as alchemy, astrology, occult medicine, magic, and any kind of divination.³ Although different in terms of processes, all these techniques come together around the same founding principle of esotericism: universal correspondences.⁴ This principle implies that, by means of correspondences between all things, seen or unseen, various things can influence one another via this interdependent network.⁵

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³ For Faivre, the occult refers to “un ensemble de recherches et de pratiques portant sur des ‘sciences’ telles que l’astrologie, la magie, l’alchimie, la kabbale.” Ibid., 42. Even though terms like magic have a dense history of their own, in Faivre’s classification, magic is part of the practices used by occultism, which in turn embodies the technical branch of esotericism: “Si l’ésotérisme est une forme de pensée, l’occultisme serait plutôt un ensemble de pratiques, ou une forme d’action, qui tiendraient de l’ésotérisme leur légitimité.” Ibid.
⁴ Faivre calls this principle “homo-analogy” (*principe homo-analogique*). Ibid., 28.
⁵ Ibid., 28–29. It should be noted that this classification—occultism as a form of practice (ensemble de pratiques) nested in esotericism as a thought process (forme de pensée)—like any definition of the occult, is not unanimous. Faivre’s classification was influenced, like many others, by Edward A. Tiryakian, who popularized this distinction between reflection/esotericism and practice/occultism in the 1970s. Marco Pasi, “Occultism,” in *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1872-5287_bdr_COM_00321. Others, like Wouter J. Hanegraaff, moved away from this distribution in the 1990s, using occultism to refer to the transformation of traditional esotericism under the impact of secularization. Ibid. However, these matters of terminology go beyond the purpose of this article, which will be based on Faivre’s classification. As Marcello Truzzi explains it, the occult is a floating concept, changing according to time and space, retaining only a certain divergent nature. Marcello Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions of the Occult: Towards a Sociological Perspective,” *Journal of Popular*
Contemporary Emanations of the Occult

Pype is not the only one to have made this choice. The occult has been increasing in popularity in the contemporary art scene for some time, as evidenced by its prominent presence in recent exhibitions, including: the memorable Traces du sacré in 2008 at the Centre Pompidou; Les maîtres du désordre in 2012 at the Quai Branly; and the Venice Biennial of 2013. Further to its presence in contemporary art, the occult has also been gaining prominence as a theme in art historical writing. The exhibition L’Europe des esprits ou la fascination de l’occulte, 1750–1950 (2011) exemplifies this tendency through its extensive catalogue. More significantly, Christopher Partridge’s concept of “occulture,” and all it inspired, embodies this contemporary flourishing of the occult. His major study The Re-Enchantment of the West describes occulture as the alternative spiritualities drawn from different traditions that compose the contemporary Western religiosities and that are intertwined with the Western culture. So intertwined, in fact, that this occult mingled with culture has become part of everyday life. It surrounds us, mainly through popular culture and the media. To quote the title of one of Partridge’s articles, “occulture is ordinary.”

If the occult is indeed everywhere and if it is indeed ordinary, why is it problematic? What is so puzzling about finding references to divination practices in a contemporary art museum? An obvious reason arises: the relationship between art, especially contemporary art, and religion is far from being settled. Moreover, the relationships between art and esoteric fields are far less studied than those between art and more traditional religious fields, such as Christianity or Buddhism. One possible

Culture 5, no. 3 (1971): 245–6. As such, the occult offers a certain liberty towards tradition when studying a contemporary object.


10 “In the study of art, religiosity is often understood in terms of various religious traditions, and hence the attention of scholars is focused on relations between art/artist and certain tradition(s), for example
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explanation for this may be the complexity surrounding the nomenclature, which Françoise Champion calls a “mystical esoteric nebula”\(^{11}\) and which is mostly made of free-appropriation and confusion\(^{12}\).

Another reason why Pype’s artwork is problematic lies in the perceived incompatibility between contemporary art and religious belief. James Elkins’ conclusions, whether or not we agree with them, are illustrative of this. According to him, there is no place for heartfelt belief in contemporary art, especially (in his case) when it is related to organized religion in the West.\(^{13}\) For Elkins, only blasphemy opens the door to contemporary art: “Sincere, exploratory religious and spiritual work goes unremarked. […] Aside from the rare exceptions, religion is seldom mentioned in the art unless it is linked to criticism, ironic distance, or scandal.”\(^{14}\)

Many famous examples appear to support this conclusion. One needs only to think of Maurizio Cattelan’s 

La Nona Ora (1999), in which Pope John Paul II is seen struck by a meteor at the ninth hour (nona ora). Another famous example: Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ (1987) depicts a crucifix immersed in urine. Or, closer to occult practices, Suzanne Treister’s HEXEN 2.0 (2009–11), uses occult practices to criticize the techno-utilitarian forces that rule the world.

These artworks have a marked critical positioning. Playing with satire, irony and derision, they openly flirt with blasphemy. However, cases like Pype’s Chutes libres may be indicative of change. In Pype’s case, as in others, the artists’ position regarding belief is not so clear. The divination technique here is presented as is—Pype added very little to Christianity, Judaism or Buddhism. Less frequently the relations between art/artist and certain subcategories of these traditions (e.g., Roman Catholicism) or more esoteric fields or currents (e.g., Freemasonry, Theosophy) have also been studied.” Nina Kokkinen, “Occulture as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Art,” Aries 13, no. 1 (2013): 11.


\(^{12}\) Partridge’s occulture has all the makings of a solution to this issue but remains to be adapted to contemporary art. While noteworthy, a more detailed exploration of this assertion is outside the scope of the current article. The special issue of Aries (2013), mentioned earlier, focuses on the concept of “occulture” in relation with modern art and offers an excellent introduction into the matter of the application of Partridge’s concept to art history. Bauduin and Kokkinen, Aries, 2013.


\(^{14}\) Ibid.
it. Does this reveal the artist’s underlying sentiment of reverence towards the practice? Does he believe in molybdomancy or not? Even though this question is unanswerable—we cannot pretend to know what Pype hides in his heart and soul nor is he bound to tell us—this apparent lack of derision or mockery clashes with the iconoclastic attitudes of the contemporary art world by not overtly communicating contempt for belief. In fact, the mere possibility of belief seems to disturb the academic world. As Nina Kokkinen explains: “apparent religiosity becomes a problem for some scholars and critics who seem to think that religiosity diminishes artistic self-expression and freedom.”15

How should we interpret this occult presence in contemporary art? That is the question this article will attempt to answer. Pype’s work will allow us to demonstrate that, instead of being an oddity, an anachronism in our modern and science ridden times, this occult presence makes sense in the here and now, shedding light on our contemporaneity and taking the pulse of the discipline of art history.

In the Throes of Molybdomancy

What should we make of this divination practice finding its way, practically unchanged, into a contemporary art event? What do we make of this artwork that leaves us in doubt as to the artists’ belief or disbelief? A possible answer to that question lies in the reversal of the situation: why not make this problem into a solution? Why not make this uncertainty the key? By seemingly confusing conquered and revealed truths, Chutes libres reflects a certain quality of the “undecidable.” The term comes from Jacques Rancière who coined it to grasp this unresolved tension between the aesthetic and political poles, which is to say between art and non-art.16 For the purpose of this article, this term will be summarized here as a threshold effect; in other words, the possibility that art is both something and its opposite. In this case, we simply cannot decide definitively between belief and disbelief; the artwork bears both, like the two sides of the same coin.

This article will demonstrate that references to the occult in current art can be interpreted and justified by their undecidability. Through this undecidability, the occult in present day art creeps in established structures, casting light on their shadows and

flourishing in fallibility. Undecidable artworks, like Pype’s, act in two ways: one, they defy partitions of all kinds; and two, they act as reflection on both contemporaneity and modernity. The occult is often presented as a margin to reason, and, consequently, it cannot be a surprise to see it question the very thing—modernity—that asserted the reign of reason.\textsuperscript{17} I will therefore demonstrate, with the example of Pype, how this undecidable occult exposes the structure of modernity while echoing our contemporaneity.

\textit{Chutes libres: Counter-History of Time}

Let’s follow \textit{Chutes libres’} advice and dive right in. How does this piece question modernity? The answer lies in the artistic choices made by Pype. Through them, we will piece together what we shall call three counter-histories:\textsuperscript{18} a counter-history of time, a counter-art history, and finally, a counter-history of modernity.

The first noteworthy artistic choice is the direct unadorned appropriation of molybdomancy, which plunges us forcefully into the world of divination. This world, as \textit{Chutes libres} reminds us, is very much alive. After all, the ritual of \textit{Bleigiessen} is still being practiced to this day in Germany, every St. Sylvester.\textsuperscript{19} By being performed in the

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\textsuperscript{17} Even though esotericism, and therefore occultism, rely on the idea of atemporal truths and tradition, both of these terms stem from the nineteenth century and remain deeply influenced by the context in which they are used. Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions of the Occult,” 635. René Guénon, whose influence in the esoteric field is considerable, is an example of this: “Celui-ci se voulait un simple témoin de la Tradition immémoriale mais cristallisa sur son œuvre une bonne partie des forces nouvelles de résistance à la modernité; son influence ne cessa depuis de croître au rythme des progrès de cette dernière.” Jean-Pierre Laurant, \textit{Le regard ésotérique} (Paris: Bayard, 2001), 162.

\textsuperscript{18} The expression of counter-history is inspired here by the connotation surrounding the word occult itself, sometimes understood as meaning “to hide something,” “to cut off from view”. In this case, by being undecidable, this occult presence reveals what was cut off from view: the thresholds of history. It thus makes visible alternatives to the mainstream historiographical models established more solidly for centuries. The alternative that will be explored here is the anachronistic model, theorized by Aby Warburg and Didi-Huberman. Georges Didi-Huberman, \textit{Devant le temps: histoire de l’art et anachronisme des images} (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2000).

\textsuperscript{19} The ritual of \textit{Bleigiessen} is a divination technique from the Germanic tradition which relies on the same process as molybdomancy: a drop of molten metal is released into cold water to form shapes that will then be interpreted. In Germany, this ritual is performed on the St. Sylvester as an omen of the upcoming year. Fondation François Schneider, “Benoît Pype,” accessed June 7, 2017, http://www.fondationfrancoisschneider.org/benoit-pype/.
world today, *Chutes libres* seems to suggest that molybdomancy was never archaic or pre-modern (in the temporal sense of the term), but that rather contemporaneity has always been anachronistic. As George Didi-Huberman explains it: “On retire de tout cela l’impression que les contemporains, souvent, ne se comprennent pas mieux que des individus séparés dans le temps: l’anachronisme traverse toutes les contemporanéités. La concordance des temps n’existe—presque—pas.”

This quotation also reveals something else: worldviews are not restrained within singular periods in time; they coexist in every “contemporaneities.” Pype makes this clear by putting a divination technique—and the worldview that upholds it—into a museum. By doing so, a predetermined vision of time and space—that is the time of clairvoyance, illustrated by a destiny that precedes man—coexists with an undetermined vision of the world—a vision widely spread in the West and in which man enjoys his free will in a story that remains to be written. Pype does not choose between the worldview of his piece and the one more willingly assumed by the museum. The time and space of divination, pre-modern according to most, coexists with the undetermined world normalized by science and modernity.

By not choosing, by being undecidable, *Chutes libres* seems to suggest another way of understanding the world, besides choosing between the predetermined and undetermined. Why not read the world like the soothsayer reads the future? *Chutes libres* shows us divergent worldviews and seems to invite us to connect them together, rather than categorize them. In this sense, the principle of universal correspondence, implied in *Chutes libres*, echoes what Didi-Huberman has to say about the atlas (as an object and as a reading process): “*Lire le monde* est une chose bien trop fondamentale pour se trouver confiée aux seuls livres ou confinée en eux: car lire le monde, c’est aussi *relier les choses du monde* selon leurs ‘rapports intimes et secrets,’ leurs ‘correspondances’ et leurs ‘analogies.’”

Undecidability, in this case, reveals the anachronisms of the world and invites us to connect them in order to better read the world.

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20 Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, 15. This quotation—like all the quotations in this article—is translated by myself from French and goes as follows: one gets the impression that contemporaries often don’t understand each other better than individuals separated in time. Anachronism passes through every layer of time, every present. The concordance of time almost does not exist.

21 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas, ou, Le gai savoir inquiet* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2011), 15. “Reading the world is way too fundamental a thing to be confined solely to books. For to read the world is also to connect the things of the world according to their ‘intimate and secret relations,’ their ‘correspondences’ and their ‘analogies.’”
Counter Art History

Let’s focus now on a second artistic choice, already mentioned above: the choice to present this technique in a contemporary art museum and as an event. Pype therefore presents us with an object that has a double status: aesthetic—by being a piece of art—and ethnographic. Indeed, nothing distinguishes *Chutes libres* from an artefact; in this case, a drop of molybdomancy that would have been sampled by an ethnologist. In other words, *Chutes libres* adopts two positions theorized by Bruno Latour: the *fact* position and the *fairy* position. Latour uses these two positions—connected through etymology—to differentiate the “non-modern fetishists” of the Gold Coast and the “modern” Portuguese. This imagined dialogue between them reveals that where the Portuguese see a choice—“You can’t both that you’ve made your own fetishes and that they are true divinities, you have to choose [...]” —the non-modern fetishists see none. In a similar manor, Pype shows us an object that is undecidably both fairy and fact; implying that between the artistic object and the ethnological object, no choice needs to be made. This lack of choice, typical of undecidability, has one major consequence: the overcoming of the aesthetic and ethnologic categories. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer reminds us, the aesthetic object and ethnologic object do not compare in terms of function but neither can they be categorized in terms of ontological categories: “Il n’y a pas d’‘objet’ esthétique: il y a des objets tout court et de toutes sortes […] qui peuvent être ou ne pas être investis esthétiquement.” Overcoming this typically Western ontological bias prevents us from isolating the fetish from the aesthetical pole. *Chutes libres* illustrates it by not choosing to be purely aesthetic or ethnologic.

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24 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, “Objets esthétiques?” *L’Homme* 170, no. 2 (2004): 36. “There is no such thing as an aesthetical object. They are object of all kinds, which may or may not be invested aesthetically.”
25 Here is how Schaeffer explains this ontological bias: “Pourquoi la notion d’objet esthétique—malgré les difficultés que posent son maniement—s’impose-t-elle de façon si ‘naturelle’ à nous lorsque nous réfléchissons sur les faits que, depuis le XVIIe siècle, nous avons pris l’habitude de qualifier d’‘esthétique’? Une explication me semble être que cette façon de penser la dimension esthétique s’accorde bien avec la compulsion à l’ontologisation du réel qui, comme Heidegger l’a montré de manière convaincante, est ancrée au plus profond de la culture savante occidentale.” Schaeffer, “Objets esthétiques?” 28.
Fig. 2  Benoît Pype, *Chutes Libres*, 2013.
(Photo: © Fondation François Schneider / Steeve Constanty)

Fig. 3  Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Panel 1, 1927–29.
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Therefore, after tackling the way we see the world, *Chutes libres* takes a swing at our epistemological categories and the way we structure knowledge. Art history is not left unscathed by this. The Western canon is questioned, following the lead of Aby Warburg’s counter art history, exemplified by his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Fig. 3). On the first panel of Warburg’s atlas, opening this treasure of visual knowledge, are images of sheep livers used for divination purposes. In Warburg’s case as in Pype’s, the dross has definitely invaded the canon.

**Counter-History of Modernity**

These two counter-histories lead us to a third one, encompassing everything: a counter-history of modernity. *Chutes libres* aims directly at the discourse of modernity. First, it does so through time: predetermined worldview confusing time and space is nothing short of a crime for modernity, which is, as Latour reminds us, the inventor of a linear and progressive timeline. *Chutes libres*, through the worldview of divination, feels no shame in confusing past, present, and future and hence reminds us that the notion of time is never exempt from questioning. By tackling historicity and time, it becomes the ambassador of its own contemporaneity; that is a contemporaneity steeped in doubts following, what many, amongst which Latour, see as the collapse of the modern framework and its—sometimes reassuring—linear timeline.

Another consequence of the two previous counter-histories is that irrationality reintegrates the field of knowledge through the undecidable and an atlas-inspired reading of the world. As Bruno Latour states: “Celui qui n’a jamais […] été obsédé par la distinction du rationnel et de l’irrationnel, des faux savoirs et des vraies sciences, n’a jamais été moderne.” This modern distribution of our knowledge, by a division of nature and culture, is slowly eroding, as Latour and many others point out. This

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28 Ibid., 55. “He who has never been obsessed with the distinction between the rational and the irrational, the false knowledge and the true sciences, has never been modern.”
collapse of the modern framework left us, as noticed by Jean-François Lyotard and the thinkers of postmodernity, with the questions “What and who to believe?” \(\text{Chutes libres}^\text{30}\) answers to these questions remain undecidable, indicating that the problem might not be with the answers but with the questions themselves. Faced with the ruins of the modern categorization of knowledge, an undecidable occult invites us to question belief (beyond its assumed naïveté) and reason (through its blind spots).

**Conclusion**

Therefore to the question “How should we interpret the occult presence in contemporary art?” \(\text{Chutes libres}\) answers with action. Even though the occult was never restrained to a pre-modern archaic past, it makes sense today in its *hic et nunc* (here and now). It gives an image to the fears and uncertainties caused by the erosion of modernity, the shrinking world of globalisation, and the fringes of science. By its undecidability, it questions what used to be—and is still largely—taken for granted and what is now slowly eroding.

Through this improbable combination of belief and doubt, the undecidable underlines the divergent nature of the occult and echoes the transgressive aspect of contemporary art—noticed, among others, by Elkins and Nathalie Heinich. We thus seem to have completed a turn in the spiral of time: while some artists (like Cattelan and Serrano) use to invalidate belief in order to emancipate the West from Christianity and question the frontiers of contemporary art, others now reintroduce belief for a similar purpose: to question frontiers and borders.

Faced with an artwork like *Chutes libres*, it is no longer a question of believing or not. It is rather a question of not ignoring or diminishing something on the grounds of belief. Like molten metal, the world keeps adopting ever-changing forms; the academic world must therefore follow, at the risk of sometimes free falling in the throes of the supernatural.

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Bibliography


