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RE-ENCHANTING THE SPECTACLE

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RE-ENCHANTING

THE

SPECTACLE

SHAYNA BETH COHN

GRADUATE THESIS
SAM FOX SCHOOL OF DESIGN & VISUAL ARTS
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST LOUIS
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THESIS ABSTRACT

“Re-Enchanting the Spectacle” explores guiding notions and central themes within the art practice of Shayna Cohn. Cohn’s installation spaces and sculptures within them, evoke a type of fabricated aura and melodramatic attitude of entertainment sites. By isolating the affect outside of the original environment, Cohn references the perceptual duality of entertainment sites within this “post-sacred” era. Entertainment venues become sites of potential transcendence, yet are also inextricably tied to their automated mechanization. Drawing on the Peter Brooks’ analysis of the historical and poetic relationship between melodrama and the sacred, Cohn argues that contemporary notions of melodrama can be found within the perception of the mechanization of the spectacle and modes of participation. Highlighting the cultural and social impact of The Club Kids, dance culture, drag queens and gimmicks, and illustrated through other artists’ work such as Wolfgang Tillmans and Nike Savvas, Cohn charts how the affective similarities in casinos, arcades, malls and dance halls gives shape to melodrama’s attempts to recapture the lost sacred while simultaneously mourning its loss.

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INTRODUCTION

The following document describes a specific attitude towards the spectacle and charts its broader implications within my art making practice. Using melodrama as a lens, the functionality and aspirations of popular culture and entertainment can be observed in relationship to the spectacle as it indicates a persistent desire to transcend into a higher state of being. Within seemingly superficial and kitschy entertainment sites, is the authentic expression of a longing that is satisfied momentarily through the participation in staged immersive spectacles. Active participation demands that the mechanization producing the spectacle be negotiated by the spectator to fully subscribe to what is understood as a theatrical display of a fictional world. Through my installation based practice I investigate the language by which the spectacle often displays a more truly authentic emotional reality. Even within the tight scripting of these encounters, one can find emancipation from the restrictions of realism, indulging in the productive space of mythologizing “the self.” I connect the following topics of ritual, theatricality, staging, transcendence, dance, mechanization and the spectacle, through the process of art making to uncover aesthetic and affective similarities revealing the noteworthy and profound flexibility of transcendence within a negotiation of subjectivity in our post-sacred era.

SECTION ONE

MELODRAMA AND THE SACRED

“MELODRAMA IS NOT TO BE UNDERSTOOD AS A GENRE CHARACTERIZED SOLELY BY EXCESS, BUT AS AN ATTEMPT TO FIND A DEEPER MEANING IN A WORLD LEFT WITHOUT THE IDEA OF THE SACRED.”

-PETER BROOKS

Melodrama has strong roots within the context of popular entertainment. It gained prominence with the emergence of the bourgeois class in the eighteenth century, and has continued to be defined based on widespread appeal and reach. The word “melodrama” comes from the French word *mélodrame* derived from the Greek *melos*, or music, and from the Latin drama meaning ‘to perform².’ The musical characteristics of the genre offer it a heightened metaphorical sense, which is keenly important to understanding melodrama’s affective mode of expression in its exteriorized and hyperbolic emotional tropes.

Melodrama, as a genre, opposes realism and therefore offers a narrative of exaggerated emotions, based within a sensational reality. Melodrama is defined by an “over the top” excess and spectacle of theatricality. Characters display emotions and thoughts outwardly, and themes are usually didactic and straightforward. In the Victorian era, the plot structures typically operated with archetypal character profiles while also expressing clear moral objectives. Contemporary melodramas in film, television, and radio build upon those archetypal character and plot structures, yet often subvert them using hyperbolic and “campy” tones to transgress popular culture or social constructions. Melodramas, especially contemporarily, are defined by

an awareness of the fabrication of theatricality and implement a self awareness of irony into the methodology of the overall tone of the story.

Melodrama seeks to make sense of a world without clear definitions between good and evil. The birth of Enlightenment marked the fall of the monarchy, which simultaneously emancipated the individual from both religious and economic suppression, introducing a moral plurality, and thereby marking the death of the “sacred.” This spiritual void continues to haunt the contemporary mind, wrestled with throughout modes of cultural expression. Melodrama expresses this very effort to locate a new, or “pseudo-sacred” through its specifically heightened affective and emotional appeal.

In dealing with the discrepancies and hypocrisy of modernity, melodrama turns to the languages of satire, irony and humor in order to contend with the persistent desire to locate a spiritual center. Claims that melodrama is a purely populist entertainment, void of emotional depth or intellectual rigor, ignore its unique finesse, yet melodrama’s unique ability allows it to synthesize complex ideas while also being democratically engaging. It appeals to the pathos of the masses in a “radically democratic fashion, striving to make its representations clear and legible to everyone. We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principle for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era³.” The sophistication of melodrama lies in its subtlety, as it both comments on and also takes the form of popular culture. While this may seem to be antithetical to its stated objective, melodrama’s satire is casually transgressive using the very substance of popular culture to undermine standard conventions. Using this perspective, melodrama becomes a genre dependent upon the audience’s ability to interpret and read beyond the exaggerated characters and plot. The

audience is invited to find meaning below the surface; a surface quality defined by its excess is precisely what beckons a more involved interpretation.

Melodrama uses subversive humor as a vehicle for criticism, that which unearths a conversation about the dissemination of power within society to be re-contextualized and questioned. In the attempt to gain a more democratic appeal, the shift in melodrama's narrative focus leads to the elevation of the mundane and everyday stories residing in the mainstream bourgeois world. This identifies a noteworthy shift from the aristocratically centered tragedy to one that elevates and investigates the drama within the lives of working families. Peter Brooks, a groundbreaking scholar on the genre, sees melodrama's continued presence within popular culture to be broadly and deeply significant. Brooks uses the plight of melodrama's hero in contrast to that of tragedy's to highlight this remarkable shift in world views: "...robbed of his gods [melodrama's hero] is not given meaning that his universe bestows upon him, but one which must be created by himself⁴." This quote identifies the epitome of the crisis of modernity and its significance for the melodramatic genre.

Melodrama offers a methodology to construct new mythologies and ultimately contend with the radical and permanent shift in the subjectivity of the individual. Specifically addressed by Thomas Elsaesser in his quote encapsulating the central question of Vincente Minnelli's genre defining career as a musical and play director, is the notion of the unanswerable:

How does the individual come to realize himself, reach his identity, create his personal universe, fulfill his life in a world of chaos and confusion, riddled with social conventions, bogus with self-importance, claustrophobic and constricting, trivial and above all artificial, full of treacherous appearance, and yet impenetrable in its false solidity, its obstacles, its sheer physical inertia and weight?.....Minnelli's motto might be well that 'rather no order at all than a false order⁵.'

The new world order Minnelli described, and its continually evolving conception of the individual as they move through an unknowable and every changing social, political, and economic landscape, continues to ring true as globalization collapses all spheres of existence. The moral center has fractured beyond repair and the individual must contend with the multiplicity of realities amidst an ever-crumbling and enigmatic center. The individual thereby collapses into their context (and the subject into the object), rendering a new type of subjectivity. Melodrama - not through a simplification of the universe, but through a sincere observation of its complexity, acknowledging its unknowable grandeur, chaos and hypocrisy - ultimately morphs this loss of the sacred into the acceptance that reality is both consumable and chosen.

Melodrama operates completely transparently, at once revealing its attempt to grasp at a deeper meaning, as that deeper meaning contends with the power structures from which it springs. Ultimately revealing that if we are to be the creators of our own meaning, to be liberated from power structures and emancipated from institutional ideologies, a melodramatic disposition can help one negotiate with the inability to replace the lost sacred, and contend with the void of contemporary life through the neo-mythological strategies of melodrama.

The following chapters will depict the specific way the “melodramatic affect” has transmuted through many derivations beginning with the subjective experience in total environments and ending with subjectivity as it constructs the individual identity. Through the specific attitudes, decorum, costuming, and staging devices, melodrama creates a space of productive ambivalence as the “self” encounters mechanized auras within spaces of popular culture, object commodities, and environments of entertainment. The consumption of the surface excess of melodrama and infatuation with technology in entertainment, articulates the way in which the spectacle contends with the loss of the sacred, and how it uses the melodramatic

disposition to build world views and construct identity. The thinly veiled mechanization of the spectacle creates a vicarious experience that illuminates the persistent desire to find momentarily relief from the loss of the sacred.

SECTION TWO

SEXUALITY AND NEUTRALIZING GENDER

The introduction of melodrama into a space of cultural production, such as nightlife, has provided a certain empowerment to those wanting to reclaim a relationship to identity creation through popular culture, illustrating that a unique approach to the sensational can be productive within this type of self-authorship. The Club Kids are a prime example of this cultural authorship and investigation into the potential of the spectacle as both *pure fun* and as progressive social commentary. They emerged in the New York dance scene in the early 1990s as the rave scene in the U.S. and Europe was gaining popularity. The Club Kids took the dance scene by storm and re-contextualized the activity of “clubbing” as an authentic mode of expression. It emerged as a lifestyle for many young “scenesters,” who used the club as a backdrop from which to manifest a unique approach to self-authoring identity. The Club Kids were a fluid group of hip, stylish New Yorkers often marginalized in their daytime lives. Many of them performed a level of gender ambiguity through transgendered dressing and exaggerated mannerisms. The club scene offered a safe and neutral space in which to explore these impulses and divergent modes of sexuality and expression.

To heighten the experience, the Club Kids dressed up in outrageous, over-the-top, and always homemade costumes that were designed specifically to create a jaw dropping spectacle. The costumes often signified the suppressed desires of an alternate ego, offering a haphazard combination of themes and cultural icons in the name of bedazzlement and theatrical expression. The themes of the costumes were tied together through their excessive qualities and being “FABULOUS!”, not based on any thematic coherency. Melodrama and theatricality were of utmost

importance, and were never sacrificed for historical or political accuracy. The activity of fabricating, often incredibly intricate and exaggerated costumes, offered the Club Kids a mode of self expression that used theatricality to transcend 'the self.' Using embellishment and ornamentation to create an alternative reality by reconfiguring pop culture materials, taps into the mythical and ritualistic potential of appropriating and retooling the iconography of material culture to renegotiate the spectacle for an authentic and transcendent experience.

The Club Kids aimed to renegotiate all components of identity, especially sexual and gender identity. This occurs in the costuming and the culture of raves themselves which used the drug Ecstasy as another means for transcendence. While the expression of sexuality in the costuming becomes more liberated, specific gender classifications become less prominent as, "The almost addictive pleasure of dance [enables] a different relationship with [one's] own bod[y], more tactile, more sensuous, [focused less] round sexual gratification⁶." As the pressure for sexual encounters became subordinate to the "pure physical abandon in the company of others without requiring the narrative of sex or romance, [an almost] pre-sexual, pre-oedipal stage⁷" of childhood reincarnates to allow for a liberation that makes the physical expression a primary objective, not the form necessarily, but the sensation.

The spectacle of sexuality and gender might have been thought to intensify the sexuality of the club scene, but instead through the transgendered "Drag" outfits, a certain transgressive approach to gender remained a dominant objective for the Club Kids'. Judith Butler identifies the understated power in gesture:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself -- as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a

performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity⁸.

Through the explicitly sexual reference, gender itself is neutralized as it is excessively displayed and heightened through a melodramatic theatricality. Sexuality and gender thereby gain a performative status within the social scene, offering another mode of transgression to locate an authentic mode of self expression outside cultural norms.

The experience of going to the club was one of pleasure, authenticity and escape for the Club Kids. This occurred through the transcendent and alternative reality created by costuming, and allowed an authentic self to emerge through the theatricality of melodrama. For the Club Kids, this liberation was facilitated by the melodrama of costuming the persona that was then assumed; thus the club became a site for transformation and transcendence. The language of popular culture and theatrical costuming was subverted and appropriated for the sake of transcendence by way of entertainment. A direct correlation between the methodology of identity creation and transcending the self, relates to the way the *excess* of melodrama was used to facilitate the Club Kids' authentic invocation of a quasi-sacredness.



(fig. 1)

The Club Kids explicitly steal from popular culture, including its overtly gendered nuances and retool its imagery and icons for their own purposes. For the youth culture, a way to regain the narrative prescribed to them by institutions and power structures lies in a version of empowerment that through hyperbolic display of sexuality and style can transform the conventional narrative of gender norms. In the height of the scene, a number of prominent Club Kids were featured on day time talk shows and interviewed by Joan Rivers and Phil Donahue. This illustrates the mainstream aversion to the movement. However prominent the resistance to this movement surrounding the Club Kids in all their drug use and hyper sexualized decorum, the debauchery was undeniably couched an attempt to create a truly authentic mode of expression and to locate the sacred.

The Club Kids (and the rave movement) had an awareness of its own creation of the spectacle as it inadvertently commented on commercial arenas of entertainment: "[The club was]

also a place of spectacle and display, as one club or rave tries to outdo the other in special effects or park attractions or videos⁹.” The spectacle itself is renegotiated in this arena where, “[The] interplay of dance, music and image produces a powerful popular aesthetic. Immersion in rave also influences patterns of love and friendship¹⁰.” The Club Kids were reconciling with the spectaclization of the entertainment industry and in doing so, they found a way to build something unique for themselves within their current situation.

Social bonds were incredibly important in this scene, and identities were formed not just through the individual costuming, but within the context of the entire community. The community arena of the club scene led to a cultural revival in the 90s that has illuminated the power of DIY appropriation of popular and material commodity culture. This movement indicated that which is ultimately manifested through the excess of melodrama, is the compelling and persistent desire to reunite with a pseudo-sacredness through the authentic and autonomous expression of the self within a co-created cultural context.

SECTION THREE

THE ABSENT PARTICIPANT

Extending into a more formal consideration of the dance club as a site for fluid subjectivity in a close observation of the mechanism as spectacle and affect producers are two artists Wolfgang Tillmans and Nike Savvas, who isolate the mechanization of the spectacle in their video and installation pieces. In both instances, the mechanism attains a certain “characterization” within the designated theatrical space of entertainment as they become subjects enacting a performance of the spectacle itself. The light fixtures procure a certain charisma through a melodramatic enactment of subjectivity, and the ease of anthropomorphizing the fixtures creates an aura of mechanized fun. This continues the conversation of the way in which theatricality and performativity lend participants the ability to find a certain irony within the mechanized spectacles of the entertainment commodity. These works define the mutable subjectivity that uses humor and irony to transcend the mechanism and create an intimate experience for a participant within a very clearly mechanized spectacle.

The installation based practice of Nike Savvas connects notions of patterning, repetition and transcendence that appear not just within art contexts, but quote the theatrical mechanisms within popular entertainment venues such as sites of commerce, theaters, and concert venues. Savvas’ piece entitled “Anthem” (2003) is a lighting installation that explores the visualization and theatricality of light as it attempts to create an aura for concert goers. Savvas uses the classic technology of concert lighting, employing “scaffolding, gobo lights, pin spotlights, colored gels, a disco ball, and a haze machine¹¹” in her visual interpretation of the song “The Carny” by Nick

Cave and the Bad Seeds¹². However, the twenty-minute lighting loop is not accompanied by music, instead only the mechanical fixtures are audible. The absence of music strikingly augments the expectations of spaces like this one: “to be in this silent space was mesmeric, eerie, sublime: it seemed a study of self, and of the silence upon which all music depends¹³.” The unanticipated silence and emptiness also changes the conversation around the experience of entertainment and “the self” within it.

By highlighting this arenas’ precise technological choreographing of visual and musical elements, the emptiness of the installation offers viewers a chance to reflect on the potentiality and structural components of a “dance floor without music, or a stage without action¹⁴.” Here, the technology replaces participants as the characters on the dance floor, suggesting an expressive and human quality within the technological sterility of the entertainment mechanisms. There is an undercurrent of irony within this space, yet also a sincere investigation of the possible means through which experiences are made. Savvas’ work contemplates how the ephemeral can gain form and shape transcendence, all in spite of the overt and omnipresent mechanism through which that experience is ultimately fabricated and mediated.

Another work which observes the phenomenology of concert and club choreographed lighting, is the three minute video by Wolfgang Tillmans entitled “Light (Body)” (2000-02). Instead of the silence of Savvas’ work, Tillman offers the polyrhythmic electronic beat “Don’t Be Light” by the French band Air to accompany the pulsing and moving lights. As this tightly looped drum beat courses, the floating lights are framed within a blackened void moving to the rhythms of the melody. Reading Tillmans’ explanation of this work, we discover he filmed this piece at a discotheque (although there were no figures pictured). It is simply a moving portrait of these ever-tilting and rotating light fixtures and disco balls to the against the darkened void of the

dance hall. Tillmans walks a line between the anthropomorphic characterization of the fixtures themselves, revealing a transformative potentiality, and simultaneously as a stoic apparatus producing mechanical auras.

Throughout Tillmans' mainly photographic practice, he is intrigued by situational ambiguity captured in the casual postures of the highly fabricated snap shot aesthetic. "Light (Body)" is a continuation of that preoccupation with the depth found in a certain heir of casualness and the potency of investigating such vague and wide territory. Tillmans' puts it best himself: "I'm driven by an insatiable interest in the manifold shapes of human activities, in the surface of life, and as long as I enjoy how things are pointless and hugely important at the same time, then I'm not afraid¹⁵." "Lights (Body)" inspired notions of dancing for reviewer Adrian Searle, who was struck by this "strange and powerful work; the body in question, perhaps, is one's own, caught in endless flashes and electro beats¹⁶." The phenomenological experience on the body is one of constant reconfiguration and contingency based on the fabricated environment in which these experiences occur. Searle suggests that an ever shifting subjectivity is at play here, in a space that is defined through oscillating lights that reveals and obscures information at a constant pace. This oscillation of subjectivity and objectivity, stillness and movement, public and private, body and mind, is what Tillmans captures in this simple observation of the mechanics from which an all encompassing and sensorially convincing aura is produced.

Participation and observation vacillate throughout one's experience within the theatrical context of a mechanized aura. Tillmans' in his observation of the mechanism of aura production and Savvas, in her deliberate decision to isolate the lighting mechanisms, both capture the oscillating subjectivity that occurs within public spaces of entertainment. One is always negotiating their level of participation and submission to fabricated environments. The

potentiality for awe and sparkle remain a tactic to fuse the mind and body within a darkened space.

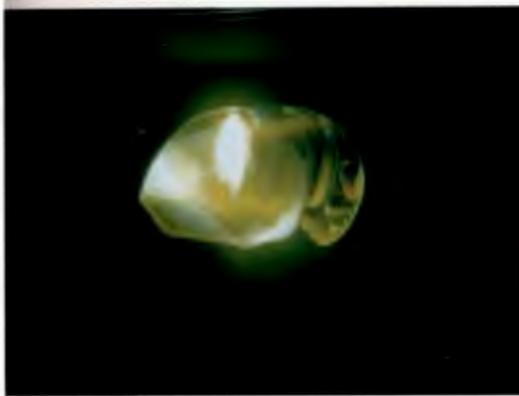
Entering into the club scene as Tillmans suggests, forces a reconsideration of how the act of dancing creates a conversation between body and space. Sam Gill speaks to the phenomenological experience of dance as he posits: “Since the dancing structurally is so compelling through repetition and pattern and the seduction of the almost, there is perhaps also the fear (as in awe) that the structurality will not allow the dancing to end¹⁷.” The perpetuation of motion and the collapse of temporality is aptly described using this metaphor, as action is imagined to continue on indefinitely. Tillmans video ends because the soundtrack he decided to use ends, as does Savva’s performance, however one could imagine that these pieces could perpetuate indefinitely if audio was provided for inspiration.

The infinite continuation of patterned actions using momentum that is created through repetition relates to the experience of rhythmic timelessness within the environment of a dance club. A body in motion loses track of its own physicality and perpetuates regardless of time that has passed or other bodies surrounding it. The mechanisms that are portrait within these two videos offer a somewhat humorous and playful analogy to the dancing body. These light fixtures perform the way sensory conflated experiences effect the body, and as a result, the self collapses into the object, and the object collapses into the environment. The body in space and the configuration of the self are contingent with the darkness of the room and are defining the space only as the body discovers and delineates it with movement.



(fig. 2)

(fig. 3, 4)



SECTION FOUR

AUTHENTICATING THE VICARIOUS

The desire to be deceived by means of the spectacle has found its way into popular culture by way of sites and environments of entertainment. Within these public sites of entertainment and commerce, a certain type of stylized fiction fulfills the desire to transcend reality and encounter a raw physical and emotional experience through the mechanized spectacle. The hyperbolically heightened experience confronts its own fabrication, ultimately revealing the plurality of realities within its layered and staged construction. The experiences within these spaces are a deliberate and calculated combination of specifically timed affective triggers, and the visitor attains a particular physical and emotional gratification. Within these entertainment spaces, the mechanism produces the spectacle, yet they merge into one experience. This contradiction describes our simultaneous attraction to the spectacle and concurrent awareness of its mechanism. In this cognitive dissonance visitors to these spaces experience a relative subjective collapse as they become complicit in the creation of the spectacle itself, and actively suspend disbelief to participant in the highly orchestrated and potentially transcendent spectacles.

The dichotomy inherent within the spectacle environment is articulated and imbedded in the theatrical fabrications that produce environments of casinos, arcades, dance halls, movie theaters, amusement parks, carnivals, flea markets, malls and other sites of spectacle displays. These spaces immediately appeal to all the senses and use specific tactics to augment reality and suspend time in order to promote their given activity. Through a range of simple to complex staging strategies, these sites use sound, smell, and touch to direct the participant through a

highly choreographed and ultimately vicarious experience, appealing to a wide range of emotional and physical sensations. Through a series of scripted interactions, the spectacle can offer an escape or transcendence from reality by actively partaking in the transformation itself, if one is willing. In these entertainment spaces, participants both consume and perform scripted interactions, becoming fully partnered in the execution of the spectacle.

The desire to transcend reality and to be deceived by the spectacle is enacted fully within these spaces of pure entertainment through the overt and excessive imitation of simple emotional states. In many ways these entertainment sites create a more heightened vicarious experience of transcendence, becoming almost a parody of “transcendence” itself. The assumption of a melodramatic attitude introduces a negotiation of the spectacle as a mechanism, and as a means to make more complex the experience to approach a type of transcendence. The excessively fabricated spaces often capture a “Baroque” or “Gilded Age” feel in the way they blatantly manufacture a chosen aura, yet efforts to do so remain transparent. The participant is therefore confronted with the staged theatricality by way of its mechanization, thereby aligning it with the attempt to revive a lost aura. Notable here is that while the participant might be fully aware of the fabrication of the environment, there remains an arguably stronger desire to have an encounter with a pseudo-sacred or an authentic experience. This desire ultimately requires a transcendence of the mechanization itself to enable the consumption of the spectacle. In his writings about the Baroque attitudes within the contemporary spectacle, Norman Kline identifies the functionality of the vicarious experience:

This obvious paradox is essential to the power of consumer experience, that innocence is more exciting when it is threatened with imaginary violence, that ‘thrills’ are crucial to innocence, that we want safe versions of death, as in melodrama or roller-coaster rides, and a thousand other stops in between¹⁸.

This quote illustrates how melodrama enables “the gimmick” to become a mode of transcendence, providing a certain depth to the participants’ experience. The participants are then protected by the gimmick itself, and the experience is enjoyed and “believed in” on those terms. This fabricated reality points to the complexity of our own constructed realities, where “reality” and “fiction” can exist simultaneously. For example, visitors scream in the Space Mountain ride at Disneyland not because they literally fear for their lives, but because the vicarious and fabricated experience allows visitors to inhabit extreme sensations in a safe and predictable way, similarly to that of the transcendent nature of “sacred” spaces which allows for the approximation of “illumination” to occur within the safety of a scripted experience. Therefore, the notion of reality and fiction becoming less important, almost fully dissolving within the context of the mechanized spectacle environment.

This vicarious experience mimics the way sacred spaces function as transcendent and symbolic retreats and resonates similarly to that of a ritual or theatrical environment, where sensations are consumed passively by participants. They allow for the simultaneity of realities to exist without infringing upon one another, congruently enabling the benefits of an “alternative reality” to be used as an escape from the primary reality. This becomes a type of productive embodiment of surreality, in that the emotions expressed are authentic, yet the situation remains completely staged. This nonetheless authenticates the desire to embody certain extreme sensations, and as seen through a melodramatic filter, is a place where the sensation and the mechanism unite to underscore a type of productive subjectivity that is amplified through an often garishly fabricated stage.

A certain kind of emotional digression can reveal ways in which we enact self deception to transcend reality. This “transcendence” into a childlike state of wonder, awe, or fear, creates a

similarly all-consuming experience that the sacred must have elicited in the minds of believers. The essential and persistent desire to be fully convinced of a spectacular farce allows for self-authorship within arenas of entertainment consumption. As the spectacle in its over-the-top excess, reflects a melodramatic approach authenticating the objectives of the spectacle, validating the innate and persistent desire to suspend reality.

SECTION FIVE

THE DISCO BALL AND THE SELF

BUT DISCO BALLS DO NOT MERELY REFLECT LIGHT; BY NOW THEY HAVE BECOME THE SOURCE OF A PECULIARLY COLLECTIVE SPECIAL EFFECT. INDEED, DISCO BALLS HAVE CATALYZED AN ENTIRELY NEW MOTION OF THE SOCIAL SPHERE, CREATING A FLUX OF HETEROGENOUS PEOPLE, SHAPING THEM INTO TIGHTLY KNIT AND MOBILE MASSES THAT DISSIPATE AND REEMERGE WITH QUIXOTIC REGULARITY. DISCO BALLS DESCRIBE NEITHER A PUBLIC NOR A MOB BUT A PROVISIONAL SOCIAL ECOLOGY. RATHER THAN LEAVE THESE MATERIALS AND POLITICAL EFFECTS TO THE CHANCE PASSING OF LIGHT -- A DISCO BALL THAT CANNOT SPIN SEEN DURING THE DAY IS A FORLORN SIGHT...ONE OF THE MOST PROVOCATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SCHEME IS A MODEL OF THE EXTERIOR, DETACHED AND FREE-STANDING IN A BLACK SURROUND, AS IF IN A DARKENED THEATER, OR NIGHTCLUB: THE SURFACE IS THE BALL IN ACTION. THIS DISCO IS ALWAYS OPEN, AND INSTEAD OF REQUIRING A LIGHT SOURCE, IT CASTS A SOCIALLY ENVELOPING BRILLIANCE AROUND THE URBAN SPECTATOR¹⁹.

-SYLVIA LAVIN

The disco ball, as a cultural icon and an aura producer, has become a central theme in my work and describes the melodramatic attitude in relationship to the mechanization of the spectacle in its most essential form. As it turns, the disco ball envelopes a space in its rhythmic and repeating aura, covering the environment and the bodies within it in a specific and uniform pattern of light. Surrounded by the glow of the disco ball, time and space becomes simultaneously compressed and elongated, stretching and confronting the unknowability of the nearby darkness. Yet, a shifting gaze offers a dramatically different experience. The viewer will just as soon move their observations onto the surface of the disco ball, charting the trajectory of the light onto the mirrored surface, breaking the affective continuum and momentarily interrupting the illusion by revealing its mechanism. This is the dynamism and morphability of the contemporary spectacle and its delights in staged auras and affects. The melodrama lies on the surfaces of the spectacle and within the mechanisms that entice the viewer to actively

submerge into the aura produced. The disco ball offers the participant a momentary and mesmeric haven from the ceaseless freneticism of an unstable world.

In the attempt to liberate one from the typical interactions within these commercial spaces and staged encounters, the humor within melodrama becomes a vehicle to enter into a more authentic representation of emotion. In all of its overly acted sentiments and highly fabricated auras, the melodramatic attitude offers an entry into what is an arguably more authentic mode of expression, not mediated by its own presumption of being correct or “true.” In fact, melodrama’s capacity for the very self awareness of its own failure, enables an authentic reality to take place. The excessively ornamented props that I make, as does the disco ball, so clearly attempts to manifest an aura yet they ultimately fail to do so. It is with the permanent loss of the sacred in mind that melodrama cultivates a liberated universe, not to fully reclaim the lost sacred, but to make transparent the way it self authors a new mystical through the “exaltation of the artifice as the vehicle of an authentic psychic, [manifests an] emotional reality.²⁰”

Thus my investigations have led me to examine the ways in which the body negotiates entertainment environments and immersive mechanized spectacles using a melodramatic attitude within the specific context of dance culture. I fabricate environments where the relationship between the body and the mechanism becomes inverted as the objectives of the mechanism itself becomes transparent in its attempts to succeed in affective production. Here the mechanized staging takes on a melodramatic caricature and emerges as the subject of the environment. The viewer therefore becomes aware of their own desires to participate in the transcendence of the mechanism producing the spectacle, yet it becomes difficult due to the agency and subjectivity granted to the mechanisms. Assuming a melodramatic attitude within spaces of entertainment does not liberate the spectator in the predictable ways a dance club or other entertainment site

normally would, however this work encourages viewers to become aware of the *desire* to be liberated and to transcend, thereby creating an agency for the desire itself.

Entering the installation entitled “WOMP WOMP” is a total sensory experience. This darkened space that is illuminated by the moving lights and blanketed with shadows, evoking a similar bodily experience to that of an entertainment environment. The viewer is confronted with many components, some stationary and others kinetic. A rotating disco ball platform takes up much of the floor space. Pedestals of differing heights surround the platform and display casually seated, highly colorful and saturate soft sculptures that are decorated with abundant embellishments. A gold pineapple chandelier hangs over head with blue and pink bulbs. On another pedestal a smaller candelabra holds three rotating colored light bulbs emitting regularly patterned red, blue and green shapes throughout the room, activating the sculptures and bouncing off the slowly turning disco ball platform. The rotating lights create a faint but persistent mechanical hum, that resonates as a static drone and a buzzing rhythm simultaneously. The title “WOMP WOMP” indicates a term that refers both to the “onomonopia” for a failed joke, and the sound of a low base beat in the dance club; the linguistic flexibility directly describes a key malleability within the vernacular of popular culture. Both humor and viscera are keenly important for the work and resonate in the title, echoing the sentiments held within the excessive sheen and ornamented surfaces.

Entering into spaces of entertainment creates expectations and desires to transcend into the reality fabricated for a participant. The spectacles are experienced through the body as they are imposed upon it as affective sensations. “WOMP WOMP” is similar to other spaces of entertainment, however there is an inability to ignore the mechanism in its attempt to manifest the expected spectacle. This contradiction of being aware of the mechanism and needing to

transcend it in order to participate in the fabricated environment, is negotiated constantly within this installation. As the sound of the motor grinds on and on, the *womping* sound pulses, and as the patterns of light become fully traceable a viewer's ability to enter into a space of transcendence is both suppressed and called to attention. The viewer then negotiates with their own expectations of the spectacle within a space of an "unveiled" mechanization, and an awareness of one's own subjectivity increases as they are pulled in and out of it continually.

Here the notion of subjectivity describes the way in which the body moves through and experiences the space, contingent on the mechanisms and the other bodies in the space. Both the mechanized spectacle and the individual contain their own narrative trajectories and intertwine in circumstantial and spontaneous ways. The individual and the mechanized spectacle become united momentarily in a theatrical moment as the melodramatic attitude suppresses the prevalence of the mechanism to fully consume the spectacle. Personhood becomes flattened into its surroundings, and the body comes to know itself as an object negotiating its own subjectivity within a space of kitsch phenomenology. The body finds unification with the scene through the deeply penetrating rhythm of music and motion of the spectacle. In these instances of physical fusion within spaces of staged transcendence, the desire to unite with the environment for even a moment has the power to overshadow an awareness of its fabrication (even when the fabrication insists).

Transcendence occurs because of the way the melodramatic attitude promotes a type of subjectivity that connects the individual and the environment through its outward display of subjectivity itself. In fact, a melodramatic attitude heightens subjectivity, contributing to an awareness of the multiplication of perspectives. A melodramatic attitude, either prescribed or self-authored, facilitates the negotiation of moments of transcendence within public

entertainment spaces, calling attention to our desire to find congruency in states of being within highly affective environments. “WOMP WOMP” delineates a study of the subjectivity of the mechanism itself, promoting a type of self awareness of the affective producer in order for the participant to reclaim an authorship over the transcendent experience within immersive environments.

The lumpy sculptures slump on the pedestals and starkly contrast the hard geometry of the machine-produced lights and platform. On top of the pedestals the soft sculptures are elevated to the height of the body and encounter the viewer directly. This posture suggest an anthropomorphic quality as one could image how their floppy, phallic and quirky blobby tubes would move if the body were animate. Their embellishments embody a certain importance potentially elevating them to ritualistic props. Just as the Club Kids donned makeup and costuming to transcend reality, these sculptures too are relic-like in their denotation of the ritualistic accouterments used to enter into a shimmering space of spectacted shape shifting.

The installation “WOMP WOMP” (as indicative of my practice at large), describes a study of the affective resonance of the spectacle as it serves the participant in many ways. Through the lens of melodrama, comprehending the proliferation of mass cultural and entertainment sites leads to an acknowledgment of the persistent desire to transcend the self and connect with something deeper. A spiritual quest has fractured and proliferated throughout many different parts of contemporary society as centralized and institutional religion have fallen out of vogue.

Within this void entertainment culture finds its easily captivated audience, searching for something “higher” as Guy Debord describes, “the spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion²¹.” Here the mechanization confronts the persistent desire to prescribe to illusions, thereby honoring that which is experienced in spaces designated for a type of

transcendence; observing the continued search for something deeply felt, fundamental, and ultimately ineffable.

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“WOMP WOMP” installation shots

(figures 5 - 10)







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Figure 4: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Lights (Body)*, (2000-2002), video still.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Harten, Doreet LeVitte, *Melodrama*, Exhibition Catalogue.
- ² Brooks, Peter, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 14.
- ³ Brooks, Peter, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.
- ⁴ Harten, Doreet LeVitte, *Melodrama*, Exhibition Catalogue.
- ⁵ Elsaesser, Thomas, *Vincente Minelli*, 217.
- ⁶ McRobbie, Angela, Postmodernism and popular culture, 164.
- ⁷ McRobbie, Angela, Postmodernism and popular culture, 164.
- ⁸ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 175.
- ⁹ McRobbie, Angela, *Postmodernism and popular culture*, 168.
- ¹⁰ McRobbie, Angela, *Postmodernism and popular culture*, 168.
- ¹¹ Wiseman, Ari, *Expanding the Synthetic Paradigm*, in *Visual Music*, 181-195.
- ¹² Wiseman, Ari, *Expanding the Synthetic Paradigm*, in *Visual Music*, 181-195.
- ¹³ Wild Gift 1 Ada Street Gallery, 2006, <http://www.wildgift.org.uk/artists/savvas.php>
- ¹⁴ Wild Gift 1 Ada Street Gallery, 2006, <http://www.wildgift.org.uk/artists/savvas.php>
- ¹⁵ Searle, Adrian, *The Joy of Socks*.
- ¹⁶ Searle, Adrian, *The Joy of Socks*.
- ¹⁷ Gill, Sam, *Dancing, Culture, Religion*, 56.
- ¹⁸ Klein, Norman M., *The Vatican to Vegas*, 312.
- ¹⁹ Lavin, Sylvia, *Kissing Architecture (Point: Essays on Architecture)*.
- ²⁰ Elsaesser, Thomas, *Vincente Minelli*, 222.

²¹ Debord, Guy, *Society of the Spectacle*.

expanded quote: "Philosophy is at once the power of alienated thought and the thought of alienated power, and as such it has never been able to emancipate itself from theology. The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Not that its techniques have dispelled those religious mists in which human beings once located their own powers, the very powers that had been wrenched from them -- but those cloud-enshrouded entities have now been brought down to earth. It is thus the most earthbound aspects of life that have become the most impenetrable and rarefied. The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise, is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself. The spectacle is hence a technological version of the exiling of human powers in a "world beyond" -- and the perfection of separation within human beings."