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Leisure, Pleasure, Authenticity and Process

While most Americans view amusement parks as a utopian escape, some people, myself included, have had the opportunity to work behind the scenes of amusement settings. This reality emphasizes the less romanticized side of the production of leisure space. The industry thrives by creating environments full of mindless entertainment and spectacle that serve as a break from the mundane or stressful tasks of everyday life. Many venues employ the use of themed spaces, creating idealized versions of reality to mesmerize their patrons. Every park is a capitalist venture that is intricately designed to offer their patron pleasure in exchange for an absurd price. In the words of Adorno and Horkheimer, “Fun is a medicinal bath. The pleasure industry never fails to prescribe it.”ⁱⁱⁱ These issues make up the core content of my art making practice and I have begun to reveal them through a variety of media.

Recreation functions as a necessity in helping people to balance out their work-centered existence. Adorno and Horkheimer write, “Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again...what happens at work, in the factory, or in the office can only be escaped from by approximation to it in one’s leisure time.”ⁱⁱⁱ In a post-modern world, the role of leisure in society has been characterized by a number of components including: a new value of free time as a central component of developed society, the dominance of consumption, and a demand for high levels of comfort, safety, security and environmental aesthetics.^{iv}

During their leisure time, most people are in search of an escape from the pressures of their daily lives and they don't want to over think or become anxious. Essentially, when people walk into an amusement setting, they want fun and entertainment delivered directly to them and the amusement industry is highly aware of this. Adorno and Horkheimer link leisure with consumption and write, "The man with leisure has to accept what the culture manufacturers offer him. Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him."^v In this sense, the park becomes a stage that is intricately designed. The enclosed amusement space can be completely monitored and controlled by the operators.^{vi}

The industry uses themed spaces, both on a macro and micro level, to captivate their patron. "Theming is now marked by a transformation—from bounded cultural object expressive of place, culture and the like to a more micro-focused dimension that is specific to groups of people, the individual, and modes of subjectivity."^{vii} Theme park designs include "transnational symbols of a multi-localized imaginary that television and advertising bring together."^{viii} Complicated facades and fantastical replicas become incredibly reminiscent of existing spaces. One walks into Disney's Epcot Center only to briefly experience romanticized snippets of prominent world cultures. People stroll through Southwest Territories, Tomorrowlands, Mardi Gras, and the like, momentarily believing they are experiencing the authentic site. Yet behind the elaborate stage sits storage units, dumpsters, and employee cafeterias, spaces the customer is not allowed to see.

Leisure space and recreation have a strong link to the discussion of desire and pleasure. Scott Lukas writes, “Though many people do enjoy the forms of entertainment that take place within themed venues, the primary purpose of these spaces is not to fulfill human needs but to play on human desires. “Desires, of course, are conditioned by human needs that can be fulfilled by entertainment spaces, including sexuality, happiness, sociality and autonomy.”^{ix} I often question what makes up that single moment of experiencing pleasure and I am constantly amazed at the lengths people will go to and the amount of money people will spend to try to achieve this moment. Going back to *Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, the authors write, “pleasure hardens into boredom because, if it is to remain pleasure, it must not demand any effort and therefore moves rigorously in the worn grooves of association. No independent thinking must be expected from the audience: the product prescribes every reaction: not by its natural structure, but by signals. Any logical connection calling for mental effort is painstakingly avoided.”^x The authors, once again critiquing the culture industry, cycle back to the idea of spoon-feeding entertainment.

Baudrillard strongly critiques the culture industry with writings that reinforce the idea that cultural discourses stimulate our desires. The amusement park functions like any capitalist production, using media and advertising to tell the consumer what they want, and then creating an artificial space for the consumer to experience and indulge in those desires. But Baudrillard takes this idea one step further in his essay on Simulcra. Baudrillard interprets Disneyland as “an elaborately artificial land created precisely to convince us that our ‘real’ lives are real.”^{xi} “Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. This imaginary world is supposed to be what makes the

operation successful. But what draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more the social microcosm, the miniaturized and religious reveling in real America, in its delights and drawbacks.^{xii} Leisure activities, such as tourism and sight-seeing, have become the modern day version of a religious pilgrimage. Americans plan entire vacations based on visiting specific parks or riding certain roller coasters, thus elevating the status of enclosed amusement space to that of the divine.

Baudrillard goes on to write, “Disney is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.”^{xiii} Baudrillard critiques the authenticity of our society, but Americans are quite aware that their world is simulated. The part of this I find most disheartening is that instead of challenging their world, most of the public enjoys it. If Disney is equally as artificial as the rest of our culture, it then becomes its own unique form of simulation as a means of escapism.

In her essay, *Eating the Other*, Bell Hooks discusses desire and pleasure with a strong cultural critique. Hooks explains how “the longing for *the* pleasure has led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the “primitive” and the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility.”^{xiv} With this statement I am abruptly reminded of the themed space’s use of cultural symbols and icons to create a sense of place. For example, Disney’s Epcot center displays minimal cultural and architectural highlights from the world’s dominant countries. I continue to question the

validity of these themed countries, as they feed ignorant Westerners a romanticized, false notion of culture.

Until recently, my own artwork has reflected the multi-sensory, idealistic version of leisure space. With a focus on visual stimulations including bright lights, saturated colors, loopy rides, games, prizes and sweet food, these elements have become a primary source of inspiration for my drawings, prints and installations. I've internalized my observations that have accumulated over the years, redrawing them from my mind to create my own fantastical world.

Upon an initial glance, my artwork appears to be colorful and happy, yet there exists a slightly more complex narrative beneath the surface. My job as a caricaturist holds an odd tension in relation to leisure space, especially when I work in the amusement park setting. I spend long days in a space intended for fun and play, but while working I cannot indulge in the enjoyments it has to offer. Instead I must remain at my stand, forced to observe everyone else's good time. Even when I draw at parties and special occasions, everyone else is there to celebrate while I am at there to work.

One of the ways I reflect on this predicament is through drawing creatures I call moggers. The moggers are headless figures that are derived from a combination of human, animal and industrial forms. The moggers have round bodies, clumsy limbs, and stand in precarious positions. In much the same way that I exaggerate facial features when drawing caricatures, I exaggerate the awkwardness of emotion and stance when I draw the moggers. They exist in my amusement-inspired fantasy worlds, yet their task is never quite clear. The viewer is left to decide whether the moggers are working to create the fun in the space, or indulging and playing within their surroundings.

Giving the viewer the power to decide relates directly back to Barthe's idea of the "death of the author." In his essay, Barthes writes, "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."^{xv} As the artist, I create my characters and landscapes based on personal ideas and experiences. When my work is viewed, its interpretation is no longer under my control, rather it is left to the mind of the viewer.

Although I sacrifice my control over the viewer, I also think of myself as taking the role of the park operator when creating my environments. I like to specifically position the characters and forms within my spaces, often dictating how they will interact together. I will even go as far as creating works that control how the viewer will "play" and move through the space. Yet once a drawing or installation is finished, the experience is left up to each individual viewer.

In my artwork, I strive to push the viewer to not only observe the piece, but to interact with it. One way I have accomplished this is by working in a variety large-scale media, which when combined form full room installations. The installations are intended to replicate the grandeur of amusement park structures and to transform the entire space into both a work of art and a fantasy world. The viewer can physically enter the space, hence becoming part of it. Another way in which I consider the viewer's role has been through a series of kinetic sculptures, in which people are encouraged to wind cranks, step on pedals, move levers and literally crawl through the work. Creating touchable art object that one can participate with is a top priority. I want to continue this way of working, finding new and successful methods of merging art and play. In relation to

Barthe's idea of the "birth of the viewer," I feel it is my job as the artist to entertain my viewers as much as challenge them,

Due to the ephemeral nature of my installation work, only a limited number of people get to experience the complete work of art. Because of this, I rely heavily on video and photo documentation to preserve the piece. Unfortunately, these technological reproductions lack the same level of interaction and aura of the original. In his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin writes, "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."

This semester's readings have forced me to think much more critically of my own artwork in addition to the amusement space that I once regarded with such high esteem. Adorno, Horkheimer, Baudrillard, and Hooks' critiques of capitalist culture, authenticity and pleasure highlight just some of the problems existing deep at the roots of our society and culture. Looking back on the artworks I have made in my career thus far, I see that I've been having a difficult time being quite as critical of lands of fabricated fun as Adorno, Horkheimer and Baudrillard have been. I have definitely recognized the creation of desire and lack of authenticity that exists in our consumer society, yet these themed spaces hold such enticement, stimulation, and power that I have felt the need to celebrate them as much as, if not more, than to critique them. I am aware of the ideas that I have attempted to address and realize the successes and failures of their execution, especially in regards to content.

Much of my current artwork barely breaches the surface of the issues that I have discussed. I would like to start creating more informed and challenging pieces that deal

less with the romanticized notions of leisure space and focus more on the production and consumption of leisure, especially in regards to the themed space. To do this, I feel I need to combine the fantasy-scapes from my mind with images of real spaces and return to drawing from source material. I want to start including all of the elements that function in leisure space, ranging from the glorified midway down to the grimy piles of food waste and refuse produced each day of the park's operation. I want to highlight the not-so-perfect side of a space so complexly designed to be perfect.

ⁱ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Edited by Vincent B. Leitch. 1223-1240. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc. 2001.

ⁱⁱ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Edited by Vincent B. Leitch. 1223-1240. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc. 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." In *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction*. By Robert Williams. p. 227. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. 2004.

^{iv} Salvador Anton Clave. *The Global Theme Park Industry*. United Kingdom: Biddles, Kings Lynn, 2007.

^v Adorno and Horkheimer. *Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. 1223-1240.

^{vi} Scott A. Lukas. *Theme Park*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008.

^{vii} Scott A. Lukas. *The Themed Space: Locating Culture, Nation and Self*. New York: Lexington Books, 2007.

^{viii} R. Ortiz. "Mundializacao e cultura." In *The Global Theme Park Industry*. By S. Anton Clave. United Kingdom: Biddles, Kings Lynn, 2007. 160.

^{ix} Lukas. *The Themed Space*. 2007.

^x Adorno and Horkheimer. *Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. 1223-1240.

^{xi} Vincent B. Leitch, Ed. "Jean Baudrillard." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 1729-1732. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. 2001.

^{xii} Jean Baudrillard. "From The Precession of Simulcra." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Edited by Vincent B. Leitch. 1732-1741. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. 2001.

^{xiii} Jean Baudrillard. "From The Precession of Simulcra." In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Edited by Vincent B. Leitch. 1732-1741. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. 2001.

^{xiv} Bell Hooks. "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance." In *Media and Cultural Studies*. 366-380. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. 2006.

^{xv} Roland Barthes. "The Death of the Author." In *Image, Music, Text*. (USA: Noonday Press Edition, 1977) <http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/barthes06.htm>.