



Robert Boyd

Kanadu

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Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery
Wesleyan University
Curated by Nina Felshin



On Robert Boyd's *Xanadu*

And now

Robert Boyd's four-channel video installation *Xanadu* takes its title from the 1980 American dance-pop musical starring Olivia Newton-John. Newton-John plays one of the nine Greek muses who descends to earth—in the guise of a feather-haired rollerbabe—and inspires a young record-album cover artist and an older jazz musician to open a sparkling new discotheque in an abandoned club. Though today often fondly remembered by those who first saw it as children, still able to appreciate its neon-colored fairy tale charms, the film was an infamous box-office flop. Upon release, it was ridiculed by critics, and to this day is viewed as one of the worst movies ever made.

Though reviewers saw *Xanadu* as a new low in the precipitous downward trend for the musical genre, audiences may have just as well avoided the film due to its very premise: by the time of its theatrical release, the dance floor and its ethos had quickly fallen out of favor with mainstream American consumers. Songs from disco's heyday such as "Last Night the DJ Saved My Life" by Indeep, "I Feel Love" by Donna Summer or "Disco Inferno" by The Trammps had mythologized the nightclub as a self-contained universe of all-consuming passions, rife with internal dramas of loves lost and won, lives built and shattered—an ecstatic, nearly mystical conception most fully realized in visual form by Newton-John's film. But in 1980, America replaced this "me generation" pleasure-seeking utopia with a new kind of fantasy world: Ronald Reagan's nostalgic set-piece of "morning in America," the ICBM-protected bubble of cold war patriotism, "family values" and conspicuous consumption. The pursuit of narcissism gave way to the apocalyptic visions of the Moral Majority at the same time that the center of youth culture shifted from the lusty disco to the shopping mall.

The yin-yang tension between these two poles—the utopian pleasures of dance music, and the dystopian visions of millennial nationalism—underpins the deep resonance of Boyd's *Xanadu*. The work describes an inescapable feedback loop of escapism: away from the pains of this world and into new realms created from the pain of others.

Open your eyes and see

Xanadu's installation in Zilkha Gallery: a photograph of a disco ball in flames shot askew, as if falling, before a delicate pink background; three video projections on three free-standing walls; a fourth on the far wall of Zilkha's contiguous



North Gallery; from the ceiling hangs an actual disco ball. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to find a vantage point from which to watch all of the images simultaneously. Instead, one must enter the field in between them, become surrounded by stimuli, succumb to the closed world. Like the architecture of a throbbing nightclub, it takes over. It overwhelms.

The five videos that comprise *Xanadu* were created from hundreds of hours of researched footage, cut into hyperkinetic montages reminiscent of the most frenetic music videos, each set to a different dance remix. The first, "Heaven's Little Helper," uses Britney Spears singing the wistful "Everytime" as its soundtrack. "Notice me," the young Britney coos, "take my hand," as the screen displays film clips first of Charles Manson, then his young female followers walking arm in arm, smiling through the halls of a courtroom. From there on, Boyd introduces footage of the most notorious cults of the last four decades: the People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, Rajneeshpuram, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, the Solar Temple, Heaven's Gate. Each follows an arc from ecstasy to destruction.

The second segment expands the death-drive logic of the cult to the scale of the modern nation. "Patriot Act" takes on a half-century-plus of political movements, from Hitler's aryan nationalism and Mussolini's fascism to the Moral Majority and Al Qaeda, set to Donna Summer's "I Will Go With You." "I'll go where you lead me/forever true," Summer croons, as George W. Bush appears in flight suit, and troops and armaments do their duty in Iraq. In "Judgment Day," Boyd expands on the religious underpinnings of political divisiveness, showcasing exhortations from American evangelicals, Israeli settlers, Islamic radicals, and Hindu nationalists, edited over a dance mix of "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" by Madonna. As religious leaders preach inflexible intolerance and hatred, the lyrics take on a new tone of eternal return and prophesy: "The truth is I've never left you."

The final culmination, "Xanadu," opens with President Bush again, "For too long, our culture has said, 'if it feels good, do it.' Now America's embracing a new ethic, and a new creed: 'Let's roll.'"

Then: "A place/Where nobody dared to go." Olivia Newton-John's sweet ethereal voice, electronically altered into otherworldly perfection, rings forth after a burst of joyous synth. But Boyd's video flies through a barrage of images of violence and destruction: men gunned down in fields under night vision, hostages held with knives at their throats,



nuclear explosions, bodies laid quickly on stretchers. The stinging anonymity of news-channel carnage and mass death. Suddenly—incongruous moments from the movie *Xanadu*, of neon-haloed muses pirouetting through Southern California. Reminders of how seductive such a childhood fairy tale can be, how comforting it is to believe in something so simple and pure—especially in a fallen world such as that which we have created for ourselves, one that forever replenishes its pain and misery.

As hundreds of images flit past the screens, the video becomes nearly unbearable, like a horror-house ride that won't stop. Imagine the feeling of a single death: remember what it was like to experience the death of your father, your mother, your lover, or your child. Or someone you don't even know—say, an anonymous body plummeting, alive, off the side of a skyscraper, shooting towards the ground. Now multiply that death by hundreds, by thousands. And understand that those deaths were painful and violent and completely the work of human decision and planning. Can one even comprehend this in its totality? It overwhelms.

What we have made is real

Lewis Mumford divided utopias into two sorts: what he called the utopias of escape and the utopias of reconstruction. The former is a dream of a better world, the latter a plan for its realization. *Xanadu* brings to mind a third mode: the utopia of obliteration. Our enemies too dream of a better world: one without us in it.

Ultimately, these utopias depend on one another. In order to escape, we strive to build our own worlds—closed worlds, complete worlds, worlds that will block out the void of unending time and inescapable mortality. And in constructing those worlds, we must destroy others. In that destruction is an affirmation of our own continuing existence, a proof of the power of faith.

"He has no purpose, worth and destiny apart from his collective body," Eric Hoffer writes in *The True Believer*, "and as long as that body lives he cannot really die."



We are in Xanadu

"Exit Strategy" is Boyd's collection of cult leaders' statements meant as both coda and introduction for *Xanadu*. (The video loop as an eternal return, a cycle without end.) In it, Charles Manson wearily declares the following:

"The police used to watch over the people, now they're watching the people. The president doesn't represent his people. He should be on the roadside picking up his children, but he isn't. He's in the White House sending them off to war. And you're saying I have to pay for this again? And again and again, I've got to pay for your sins. I've been laying up here paying for your sins for two thousand years. How many times have I got to pay for your sins? I'm getting tired."

This passage speaks to many layers of hopelessness. Not only can a Messiah no longer save us, but now he takes the form of a cult leader and architect of serial murder: Christ and Antichrist collapsed into one. And the social sins Manson delineates have yet again come to pass in our own day, as if history's knowledge can offer us merely a bleak vision of an inevitable future. Likewise, *Xanadu* juxtaposes the naïve plans of utopia with the most brutal images of contemporary reality. Boyd suggests that the best that art can offer, in times when the persistence of human pain and suffering seems inevitable, is an acidly clear vision of what it means to live at a moment that has yet to offer any plans of its own for a better future.

—Ed Halter

Robert Boyd is an interdisciplinary installation artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. His 4-channel video installation *Xanadu*, 2006, has been exhibited at PKM Gallery, Beijing, 2006; The Hospital, London, 2006; and Participant Inc, New York, NY, 2006. His other installations and solo exhibitions include *Recent Video Works*, 00130Gallery, Helsinki, 2005; *The Virgin Collection*, Schroeder Romero, Brooklyn, NY, 2002; *Transcendental Landscape*, Smart Project Space, Amsterdam, 2001; and *Deathstars*, Islip Art Museum, Islip, NY, 1999. Recent group exhibitions include *Into Me/Out of Me*, Kunst Werke, Berlin, 2006; *Darkness Ascends*, The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto, 2006; *Fugitive Eternity*, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, 2006; *Pop Politics Power*, Elga Wimmer Gallery, New York, NY, 2005; and *Democracy Was Fun*, White Box, New York, NY, 2004. He was awarded a Rema Hort Mann Foundation Grant in 2006 and a New York Foundation for the Arts Artists' Fellowship in 2004.

Xanadu: A Compendium

Having peaked in the late 70s at a high point of Carter-era optimism, disco was formed from an amalgam of black, Latin, and gay subcultures. Villified at the time for its seeming promotion of male effeminacy (i.e. homosexuality), its embrace of a proactive female sexuality, and its racial non-distinction, disco, with its voracious capacity to sample and reshape excerpts from multiple musical genres, had the ability to reduce “everything to its surfaces [...] so that the profound and the inane have an equal opportunity to stimulate.”* Robert Boyd’s synchronized 4-channel video installation *Xanadu* exploits the duality that disco provides and combines it with the organizational structure of disco’s visual reincarnation—the music video—to dramatize recent social and political events.

Culled from hundreds of hours of archival footage including that of doomsday cults, iconic political figures and global fundamentalist movements, *Xanadu* tweaks, condenses, and re-frames modern events into seconds-long image bites, representing a history of apocalyptic thought as a series of MTV-style music videos within a setting reminiscent of a discotheque.

The choice of disco reverses the classic 70s punk vs. disco dichotomy, in which the harbingers of “no future” were clearly the self-disenfranchised punks. In Boyd’s construction, supported by extreme and often violent footage meticulously gathered over the course of several years, we see a current worldview in which mass annihilation and the Apocalypse are solidly in the hands of those empowered by their people. His choice of dance music suggests a volatile segue from the “feel good” generation of the late 70s to the current “feel bad” generation of the 00s. Taken as a whole, the *Xanadu* videos insinuate that humanity is not apathetic about its own demise but, on the contrary, is furtively engineering it through a form of collective self-destruction.

Introducing the theme of the Apocalypse, Boyd’s video “Heaven’s Little Helper,” 2005, begins with an excerpt from *Masada*, a 1981 mini-series about the Zealots, a sect of Jews who defended their right to be free from an oppressive Roman regime through an act of mass-suicide. Fast-forwarding into “family” footage of seemingly wholesome hippies and children dancing in natural settings, Boyd marks the end of sunny popular culture in the U.S. with iconic images of the Manson Family. Continuing in this vein, the video incorporates archival footage of some of the most infamous doomsday-cult gurus and their devout disciples including the Hello Kitty-flanked Shoko Asahara of Aum Shinrikyo, architect of the sarin gas attacks on Tokyo subways; the Reverend Jim Jones of the People’s Temple; Marshall Applewhite of Heaven’s Gate; and David Koresh of the Branch Davidians.

“Patriot Act,” 2004, takes a global historical sampling of iconic leaders of the Left and Right since World War II to stage a secular milieu of “followers,” insinuating that genocide can take place only through collective effort. The speed of the video accelerates as images of parades and victory celebrations rapidly devolve into images of war and genocide, leading to the video’s cataclysmic end. Edited between views of numbed and orderly masses, startling images of violence and death, both iconic and suppressed, are deployed. Caught in the blur are images of the men who have redefined the political landscape of the world from some of the most pivotal moments in history.

“Judgment Day,” 2006, chronicles the rise of fundamentalist religions around the globe, including audio and video excerpts from Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell of the Christian Right in the U.S.; Ian Paisley of Northern Ireland; Islamic fundamentalists Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin Laden, and Ayatollah Khomeini; Daniella Weiss and Eliezer Waldman of Israel’s Gush Eminent; and Hindu nationalists Bal Thackeray and L.K. Advani. The video depicts their desperate, increasingly violent, and sometimes successful attempts at establishing theocracies. Further leveling the terrains of religious and political extremism, “Judgment Day” blurs the already indistinct lines between civil necessity and fanaticism, and the shattering consequences thereof. The video also contains the only original footage in the exhibition, an excerpt from the artist’s own video of the World Trade Center collapse.

The series’ culmination, “Xanadu,” 2006, is a three-channel video that begins with George W. Bush’s post-9/11 address to the nation, in which he declares the end of the “feel good” era and the beginning of a new one. This era, the artist suggests, is *Xanadu*—a conglomerate of our fears, paranoia, and prejudices—an envisioned Apocalypse in the process of being actualized.

Serving as both the prologue and epilogue for *Xanadu*, Boyd’s “Exit Strategy,” 2005, features Rapture-ready prophets such as Charles Manson, Brenda McCann of Manson’s Family, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, Shoko Asahara and Luc Jouret of the Order of the Solar Temple. Addressing topics such as death, suicide, the President, and the dire state of the world as they perceived it, the video contains audio and video excerpts from some of their final hours, including Jim Jones’ suicide sermon at Jonestown, David Koresh’s 911 call with the FBI, and Marshall Applewhite’s farewell video, among other tragic and telling moments.

By contrasting the familiar and the fringe, the popular and the notorious, Boyd’s *Xanadu* suggests a displacement between the euphoric idyll promised by disco and the chilling reality of collective human brutality.

—Lia Gangitano

* Tom Smucker, “Disco: a soundtrack for communal ecstasy,” *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1992).