

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MAY 5, 2006

Art in Review

Robert Boyd

Xanadu

Participant Inc.
95 Rivington Street, Lower East Side
Through May 14

In his mind-cudgeling four-channel video installation, "Xanadu," Robert Boyd uses the rapid-fire editing of Internet news clips, television cartoons and vintage documentary films to set Armageddon to a disco beat.

From its opening image of President Bush appearing to say "Let's roll" (the words are dubbed over a clip of a speech), the video is a stream-of-consciousness record of human catastrophes. World War II and the present war in Iraq serve as chronological bookends. Shots of Hitler and Ronald Reagan alternate with shots of the Rev. Jim Jones and Pope John Paul II. Politicians and televangelists preach. Hippies chant. Charles Manson smiles. Bodies pile up at Auschwitz, rot in the fields in Vietnam, litter the ground at the People's Temple in Guyana. Under everything, disco pounds away.

Mr. Boyd, a gay man from a fundamentalist Christian background, uses disco with a purpose. As music associated with black, Latino and gay subcultures, it had a built-in political edge. Yet its propulsive, feel-good sound quickly became music-video fodder. A potential stimulus to action became a narcotic.

As intensely manipulative political art, "Xanadu" can usefully be compared to Thomas Hirshhorn's much-discussed installation at Barbara Gladstone last winter, with its photographs of the mutilated bodies of dead Palestinian fighters. The Hirshhorn show, in my view, served up way too much artiness with its politics. At the same time it did let you process its violence at your own speed. Mr. Boyd, covering a broader historical spectrum, cuts right to the political chase, but at a pace that leaves your head spinning, at least until the very end.

"Xanadu" concludes with agonizingly protracted shots of people falling from the World Trade Center, and of a snow of paper floating in the air after the twin towers collapsed. That this ultra-sensitive material is presented without sentimentality or sensationalism makes its effect all the more chilling. It becomes a natural wrap-up to a trailer for the Apocalypse.

HOLLAND COTTER



Participant Inc.

A scene from Robert Boyd's four-channel video installation "Xanadu" at Participant Inc.

Time Out

New York

Art

Reviews



Robert Boyd, "Xanadu"
Participant, through May 14
(see Lower East Side)

When the inter-title APOCALYPSE! appears in Robert Boyd's video *Heaven's Little Helper* (2005), sandwiched between archival clips of well-known doomsday cults—Heaven's

Gate, the Manson Family—it's hard not to utter a morbid laugh. It isn't that the word itself is funny, it's the colorful, retro font in which it is written, the disco beat with which it collides and the gratuitous exclamation point that accentuates it. These details transform its ominous overtones into faddish excitement—the kind associated more with a cool new trend than the end of the world as we know it.

This wry inversion of meaning is at the heart of Boyd's installation "Xanadu," which explores society's impulse to self-destruct through four exceptional videos. Three on the gallery's upper level center on historic political figures and their followers, cults and funda-

mentalist religions. Edited MTV-style in short, choppy sequences and synopated to a disco soundtrack, the videos intersperse archival news footage with the occasional cartoon or shot of commercialized religious kitsch. The gravity of the main subjects is further displaced by the light of a rotating mirrored ball, which imbues the darkened gallery with the feel of a '70s-era club.

A projection on the floor of the gallery's lower level features the ramblings of self-appointed prophets such as Charles Manson. In this well-edited and rigorously researched piece, as in the entire installation, Boyd rises above the often shallow affect of appropriated political footage to reveal how collective fears of apocalypse compel some to voraciously embrace leaders and movements the way others greet the latest dance craze. —*Lauren Cornell*



THE NEW YORKER

MAY 15, 2006

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

GALLERIES— DOWNTOWN

ROBERT BOYD

Found footage of recent events is edited into a macabre, at times comical fantasy in “Xanadu,” a suite of projected videos that pair ranting politicians, evangelicals, and self-appointed messiahs with a pounding disco soundtrack. The point is that entertainment culture has become a spiritual supplement for consumerist society (with Disney and Hello Kitty as new objects of worship) and that most promises of salvation in the modern world have ended rather badly. He could have skipped rehashing the usual list of “evil” suspects—Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussein—but this visual and aural onslaught makes it chillingly clear that prejudice and hate, rather than peace and love, are the universals by which the world, in all its multicultural differences, seems united. Through May 14. (Participant, 95 Rivington St. 212-254-4334.)

Flash Art

R E V I E W S

ROBERT BOYD

PARTICIPANT INC



ROBERT BOYD, *Xanadu*, 2006. Four-channel video installation. Courtesy Participant Inc, New York. Photo: John Berens.

Fringe cults, religious fundamentalists, fascist movements, George W. Bush and noteworthy extremists from the past century are the subjects of Robert Boyd's remarkable video cycle "Xanadu." Expertly cut in rapid-fire montages, these MTV-style music videos are accompanied by a vexing soundtrack of dance music.

Boyd's historical time warp is exaggerated by a pink disco ball, which hangs before the videos. The suggestion is that the "feel good era" marked by disco's liberation politics has ended. Boyd terms the new paradigm the "feel bad era" or "Xanadu." He rigorously traces a global culture obsessed with apocalyptic ideologies, in which the masses anticipate and actualize their own annihilation.

The four-channel "Xanadu" unfolds in chapters, introducing the theme of the apocalypse first in *Heaven's Little Helper* (2005). Here Boyd focuses on history's most convincing doomsayers, like Charles Manson, Jim Jones and David Koresh. *Patriot Act* (2004) follows, non-linearly sampling footage of persuasive leaders from the far Left and Right and the devoted masses of followers they inspired. The next video, *Judgment Day* (2006), is perhaps the most unsettling. A chorus of religious fundamentalists — from Jerry Falwell to Ayatollah Khomeini — ferociously proselytize. The horrifying footage of the World Trade Center that follows confirms the devastating consequences of their religious fanaticism.

The finale of "Xanadu" is an emotionally visceral barrage of violence and devastation. The overpowering succession of war, terrorism and riot imagery becomes a blur, as the nihilistically campy soundtrack accompanies the video's spiraling conclusion. Boyd successfully brings to life a panicked portrait of our collective paranoia. He depicts the masses as nihilists, and they're dancing to the beat of destruction.

Matt Wolf



'Xanadu (World on Fire)', 2006, by Robert Boyd (Left); 'After the Spit Dries Up and the Tape No Longer Sticks', 2006, by Ivan Witenstein (Right)

A New York minute

More than five years after 9/11, young New York artists respond at their Beijing debut writes **Stacey Duff**

Writing in *The New York Times*, Anthony Burgess once asked whether the United States was falling apart, suggesting also that the nation should look to its writers and artists as guides. As American supremacy is challenged against a backdrop of terrorism and war, that beckoning seems even more relevant today than when it was published in the autumn of 1971.

New York, Interrupted – showing now at PKM Gallery – expresses equal measures of loss and rage at the tragic loss of life on September 11th. Many works in this 17-person show do not seem immediately connected to 9/11, until you pause, when this sometimes boisterous effort grows solemn.

A school of silver fish from Hyungsun Shin streams around imposing concrete beams, making an invisible ocean of the gallery's high-ceilinged space. Tony Feher's site-specific installation – tabs of blue tape pasted to a wall-length window – recalls the clear blue of that tragic Manhattan morning. Or do these two works

indicate that the city has healed?

'On the whole,' says curator Dan Cameron, 'New York is doing really well. Two years ago I'm not sure I would have said that, and three years ago definitely not, but now I would, and that's probably the easiest way to nail down the title's meaning. We were interrupted, and now we're back.'

'New York is not the only centre anymore,' adds gallery president Kyung-mee Park from Seoul. 'This show certainly addresses 9/11 but it also expresses the changing state of the American people. Since Beijing is becoming an important new power, this is the only proper place where it could make such a bold statement.'

Some works recall the naivety of pre-9/11 America. Cory Arcangel's two-channel video, *Sweet 16*, loops the first sixteen measures of Guns 'N' Roses' 1987 music video, 'Sweet Child O' Mine'. Lead singer Axl Rose is perpetually young in tight leather pants, but the lyrics – 'She's got eyes of the bluest skies' – never come. We're trapped at Headbanger's Ball.

In Robert Boyd's four-channel video *Xanadu*, Olivia Newton-John and Madonna provide a disco-beat soundtrack as we watch decades of carefully choreographed film footage – fundamentalist preachers, cult suicides, mass exe-

cutions and terrorist attacks. Boyd says that as a child of the 1980s Reagan-era, he was captivated by MTV. 'So yes, I like dance music and clubs. I chose to reference the disco era to suggest a volatile segue from the feel good era of the 1970s to the feel bad era of the 2000s.'

Boyd's piece is a tour de force. *Xanadu's* suggestion that the human appetite for hatred cannot be sated is hardly made palatable by the glittering, upbeat ambience. As a disco ball spins above our heads, we move to the beat on impulse. But the violent parade of images eventually glues us to the floor. Dancing

'Making this work was not fun. It was utterly heartbreaking'

at this moment not only feels wrong, it feels impossible. The towers come tumbling down.

The soundtrack might make some viewers nostalgic, but Boyd recalls how spending three years to cull film footage was anything but 'fun'. 'Watching decades of human atrocities – bodies being dumped into mass graves at

Auschwitz, zipped into body bags at Jonestown, people jumping to their deaths from atop the World Trade Center – none of that was fun. It was utterly heartbreaking.'

Boyd clarifies that his video 'is not about George W. Bush or fundamentalist preachers or cult leaders or fascists. It's about the people who willingly follow them. It's about the symbiotic relationship between leader and follower. It's about the viewers experiencing the piece. It's about us!'

Up on the second floor, in a poetic installation by Sanford Biggers, we mellow again in darkness. But the soundtrack has changed from dance-beat to sad – somehow primitive – cries of experimental jazz. The disco ball has fallen in the center of the glittering room, and shattered. It's as if we just crashed a party where the revellers have already gone to bed.

'When the show was done and the artists and I stood back to have a look,' adds Cameron, 'we were all struck by the fact that the show seemed weighty with a sense of loss, while also boiling over with rage, and the two never manage to cancel each other out.' *New York, Interrupted* shows at PKM Gallery in Caochangdi until February 20. See listings for further details.

Politically Curate

Sundance's New Frontier on Main captures current concerns in a variety of ways.

BY JACOB STRINGER
comments@slweekly.com

It's not like there's simply one glaring question staring you down when you attempt to curate an art installation for a major international film festival. This year's New Frontier on Main curator Shari Frilot faced a number of dilemmas regarding the direction of a show in conjunction with Sundance. Which media? Should the focus be broad or narrow? Outsider or insider art? Given the festival's independent aesthetic, should the artists be established or newly discovered? Should all the work be cinematic or can you follow your internal compass, to create a cohesive exhibition?

"It was my intention to put together a very eclectic and somewhat thematically balanced show," explains Frilot. "I also wanted to feature a number of different forms and number of different philosophical views. You might have Robert Boyd's *Xanadu* at one end of the gallery, and at the other, Daniel Rozin's *Mirrors*, work that is purely aesthetic. Jim Campbell's piece [*Home Movies 300*] is somewhat of a throwback to home movies and nostalgia, whereas Eddo Stern's work [*Dark Game, Best Flame War Ever*] is quite political and sort of radical in its formal engagement with gaming."

In fact, although Frilot may not have seen it coming with her initial curatorial aim, a fair number of the included artists ended up answering her call with just such work—creations that are fairly sociological or political in bent. Take, for instance, Stephanie Rothenburg and Jeffery Crouse's *Invisible Threads: Sweatshop Jean Factory in Second Life*—which in many ways is self-explanatory based upon the subtitle alone. According to Rothenburg, the online universe of *Second Life* simply provided a unique platform to explore ideas such as the boundary between the virtual and the real, the politics of labor and the cultural pervasiveness of play.

Then there's also the aforementioned *Xanadu*. Originally a six-channel installation designed to fully engage the viewer by surrounding them with rapid-fire images of fundamentalism, cults, fanaticism, intolerance, political idolatry, etc.—all in the middle of a discotheque-like environment—the work was converted by Boyd into a single-channel installation that now feels like watching politically charged music videos on MTV.



Virtual sweat: A clip from *Invisible Threads*.

Pieces like these beg an answer to one question looming in the room: Is it the uncertain times we are all trying desperately to live through that should be held responsible for all this great politically-charged work? According to Boyd, "That 'proverbial elephant' is *always* in the middle of the room, so might as well put it to use! My work has always been grounded in socio-political concerns, so that's not really a new development for me. I'm a gay man who grew up in a fundamentalist Christian household in the Midwest. What do you want from me—a love story?"

But, as Frilot noted, a political bent definitely was not her curatorial aim. "For example, Hasan Elahi [*Tracking Transience: The Orwell Project*] is someone also politically engaged in a very interesting way, but what put him on my radar—what puts any artist on my radar—is how well he integrated what he was trying to say with what he is doing formally. That's when you get a little shiver in your tummy, when you see something that is superintegrated in a clear and unique way, and it hits you like a lightning bolt."

So the fact that the show is so politically engaged comes as much from Frilot's own sensibilities as it does from the artists—a number of the artists she was interested in simply went ahead and created work that leaned politically. As noted, it's kind of hard to miss that proverbial elephant in the middle of your living room, especially if it is just the thing responsible for making your tummy shiver. **GW**

Open to all Sundance Film Festival credential holders and the general public as space permits.

NEW FRONTIER ON MAIN
 333 Main Street
 Lower level
 Park City
 Jan. 18-25
 noon-8 p.m.
 Saturday, Jan. 26
 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

sculpture

April 2008
Vol. 27 No. 3

music, the dance-club syncopation of its projections, and the ultimately disturbing disconnect between the tone of the presentation and its “message,” there is no way to perceive this work *except* in three dimensions. It would be impenetrably complex if not for the unifying fact that human perception is not merely two dimensional and visual, but also audial, spatial, and time-based.

Xanadu included four flickering video “channels” played out in surround-sight-and-sound in a dog-leg gallery configuration. Three channels were projected on the end and flanking walls of the main space; a fourth, related, channel terminated in a remote satellite gallery. From the darkened threshold of the joint space, two related paths beckoned the viewer—one directly ahead, one at a right angle.

Viewers entered the long, dimly lit main space from one end, greeted by a slowly spinning, 36-inch mirrored ball (refracting a wheeling constellation of star-like lights on both the viewer and the space). An ‘80s-era soundtrack defined the installation’s sculptural volume (one entered the cubic block of sound almost like a swimming pool). In this movie-theater world of sound and darkness, the animated planes of projected video footage established the three-dimensional perimeters of our encompassed perception.

The installation obliterated all sense of place except this artificial one. To the tunes of an inane Olivia Newton-John movie-musical (*Xanadu*), along with pounding disco music, viewers were artfully barraged with faces appropriated from archival news footage, ranging from Charles Manson to Osama bin Laden, and featuring religious fundamentalists of every stripe.

One by one, talking heads filled the screen, ranting and posturing, proselytizing and entreating. These



Robert Boyd, *Xanadu*, 2006. Two views of synchronized 3-channel video installation.

to haunting, dreamy footage of a blooming mushroom cloud.

Boyd’s approach is rooted in the irony between reality and its framing. Via unrelenting juxtaposition (*Heaven’s Gate* and *Hello Kitty*; George W. Bush saying, “Let’s roll”; the body count of serial global genocide—and mass cult suicide), all piling up under the breathless baby-voice of Newton-John, Boyd refreshes our collective memory by divesting both word and image of their uncritical familiarity.

No disco, this, but rather dancing, singing, and, in the name of “family,” going willingly to self-immolation. Ultimately *Xanadu* delivers these acts of seemingly irresistible and self-forgetting corporate seduction (paralleled here by media seduction) blatantly and beautifully, with all the panache of a convincing cinematic discotheque.

—Patricia Rosoff

figures, artfully disembodied from their time and place and set to “shuffle,” are stunningly alike in their numbing sameness. The video footage captures every stage in the

life cycle of radicalism—seduction, absorption, excitement, militant marshalling, and suicide. There is everything from the freckle-faced, scary babble of Squeaky Fromme