



Clive Holden

utopia suite disco

A Self-guided Tour

Text by Vicky Chainey Gagnon

Clive Holden is a Toronto-based artist whose projects cross boundaries between film, video, web culture, and new forms of literature, with a focus on how these mirror social and political identities. His most recent work, the multimedia installation *Utopia Suite Disco*¹ creates a contemporary utopian space in which viewers are invited to ponder the question "Does hope beget movement?" The work features a dance floor, a cubical "light hut," a series of projected images of historical and fictional utopian heroes, and a soundtrack. Essential to the work is an implicit nostalgia for the 1970s conveyed through a disco soundtrack² and images of John Travolta as Tony Manero, the disco-dancing king from the 1977 hit film *Saturday Night Fever*. Like Travolta's character in the film, viewers are invited to emancipate themselves by dancing to an intoxicating beat while enclosed in a digital disco of utopian dreams.

Echoing coloured disco lights, *Utopia Suite Disco*'s four groups of moving images are colour-coded: red for passion, green for hope, yellow for fear, and blue for sorrow. Embedded in each video loop are references to iconic scenes and images from *Saturday Night Fever* (p.1). In the yellow loop, for example, Travolta, cigarette in mouth, swaggers into the disco, in a state of exaltation and ready to take on the night. In the blue loop, he is caught in a rapturous kiss with



his dance partner, as a dizzying 360-degree camera pan envelops them. An attention-grabbing effect employed by Holden is that of the media tile, where the screen is divided equally into squares, creating a quality of all-overness. This not only draws awareness to the flatness of the screen but also generates a reflection on multiplicity. One by one, Holden's handpicked 'Utopian Hall of Fame' appears in these media tiles, breaking the regularity of the image and emphasizing the idea that collective momentum gives rise to visionary thought. Thomas More (who coined the word Utopia), Gloria Steinem (women's rights activist), Che Guevara (Marxist revolutionary), Harriet Tubman (anti-slavery activist), and Audré Lorde (writer and poet) form part of this pantheon.³

What is the connection between utopian philosophy and disco, which is remembered as a subculture that produced a historical moment of pure hedonism? Holden seems to be reminding us here that hopes are often matched with impending catastrophe, actions with adversity, and that Utopia is mostly built on disaster and runs on hope. Along with the rise of many new movements and ideologies, the

late seventies saw massive change in practically all spheres of North American society: economics (the oil crisis), politics (neo-liberalism), environmentalism, the family unit (considerable increase in the divorce rate), social equality (Gay Rights and Feminism). By exploring the idealism of the seventies through the twin themes of Utopianism (hope) and progress (movement), Holden positions his project politically and suggests not only that change comes from humanity's ability to hope despite on-going fear of cataclysm but also that hope is linked to physical movement.

The ideas of hope (Utopianism) and movement (progress) are also married in the project's formal elements: the moving image as a medium in art making is coupled with John Travolta's depiction of a lower middle class, second-generation Italian who dreams of upward mobility and uses disco dancing as an outlet for the expression of that dream. In Holden's words, "*Movement* is the core material/idea of media/film/video art—moving image art creates a distinct but open-ended space that invites the community into a dialogue. Movement is also the answer



to despair; it's the antidote... When we fear we slow down. We stop at our peril, and become easy targets, easily manipulated by politicians, the dauntless talk machines of business, the inorganic, and the heartless.¹⁴ Other materials specific to the project, such as the hut, also embody utopian ideals in architecture. The hut is a potent symbol of the nomadic: portable, flexible, temporary, light on the land, it is emblematic of a shelter in the storm. In *Utopia Suite Disco*, the hut is used as a defined cultural unit and a backdrop for an extended and stupefying cinematic fantasy. It is also a home, a shelter for the viewer to contemplate utopian art and ideas, and physically respond to them through dance.

In *Utopia Suite Disco*, Utopia is no longer a destination, it is a process, it is *movement*—in the literal sense, as a core formal element of moving-image art, and in the figurative sense, as in progressive politics, our r/evolutionary mandate and our legacies of idealism coupled to engines of radical change. Contrary to historic schemes for beautifully ordered cities, the high-octane art project *Utopia Suite Disco* is about dancing to the beat of our hopes and fears

to create movement for change. In our individualistic consumer culture, is it possible to salvage a just society from a world that we know is far from ideal? The artist invites you to dance along as you mull over this thought.

[Vicky Chainey Gagnon]

1. Utopia Suite Disco is part of a body of work titled Utopia Suite that was begun in 2006 and has a projected end date of 2012. The suite will include single- and multi-channel works, a series of light hut projections, multimedia performance/lectures, text and an artist book. The completed projected will be compiled into an interactive DVD and documented at: www.utopiasuite.com. 2. The sound element of the installation was made in collaboration with Oscar van Dillen, a Rotterdam-based composer who is an expert in world music. 3. The complete list of Utopian Hall of Famers and dreamers includes Thomas More, Marie Louise Berneri, James Joyce, Audre Lorde, Jimi Hendrix, Aung San Suu Kyi, Che Guevara, Georgia O'Keeffe, Aldous Huxley, Gloria Steinem, Italo Calvino, Harriet Tubman, Jesus Christ, John Berger, Karl Marx, Rigoberta Menchu, Nelson Mandela, Kurt Schwitters, Plato, Frida Khalo, Ornette Coleman, Vita Sackville West, Peter Kropotkin, Yoko Ono and John Lennon, Thomas Sankara, David Suzuki, Louis Riel, Emma Goldman, Simone de Beauvoir, Tommy Douglas, Naomi Klein, Olof Palme, Woody Guthrie, Wangari Maathai, Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, Hugo Chávez and Walter Benjamin. 4. Clive Holden, artist statement, Utopia Suite Disco. On file at the Foreman Art Gallery.

Clive Holden has exhibited his film and video works both nationally and internationally at venues including the Anthology Film Archives, New York; the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; the International Festival of Films on Art, Montreal; Kosmopolis Festa Internacional de la Literatura, Barcelona; and the Festival di Palazzo Venezia, Rome. He has lectured and given talks for Kino Arsenal, Berlin; Holland Festival, Amsterdam; the Images Festival, Toronto; the Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen; acentric., Winnipeg; the Deutsch-Amerikanische Institut, Heidelberg; the Royal Danish Academy of Art, Copenhagen; and the University of Manitoba School of Architecture, Winnipeg. In 2003, his book accompanying the film project *Trains of Winnipeg* was short-listed for the Manitoba Book of the Year Award and the Carol Shields Winnipeg Book Award.

Vicky Chainey Gagnon holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with a concentration in film studies and art history (Concordia University, 1999), as well as a Master of Arts degree in interdisciplinary studies with a specialization in the history and practice of avant-garde filmmaking practices (York University, 2005). She is presently working towards a Ph.D in Muséologie, patrimoine et médiation at UQAM while also working at the Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop's University, where she has been Curator since 2005. Her current research concerns emerging institutional curatorial practices in Canada. She is the author of several essays on visual and media artists such as Nelson Henricks, Denyse Thomasos, Lucie Chan, and Carla Zaccagnini, and has also been the organizer and curator of numerous exhibitions of Canadian and international art in Toronto, Winnipeg, Montréal and Sherbrooke.

EXHIBITION

5–30 June 2009

RECEPTION + DISCO PARTY

8–10 PM, Friday 5 June

ARTIST LECTURE + UTOPIAN CONVERSATION

2 PM, Saturday 6 June, at Cinematheque

WORKS EXHIBITED

Utopia Suite Disco

Blu-ray Disc x 4 + mp3 (5 channels looping + re-mixing), 2 x 4 lumber, metal brackets, wood veneer flooring, rear screen material.

Ken Dryden

Computer-based projection creating randomly regenerating patterns using a hybrid blend of cinematic and web-based technology. 7 minutes looping + re-mixing.

Y.O.U. (Your Own Utopia)

On-line, on-going community outreach and conversation.

www.utopiasuite.com

Utopia Suite project website projected from CD-ROM.

Clive Holden's *Utopia Suite* is co-presented by PLATFORM centre for photographic + digital arts and the WNDX Festival of Film & Video Art and circulated by the Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop's University (Sherbrooke, Quebec). PLATFORM + WNDX Festival would like to acknowledge the support of the Manitoba Arts Council, Winnipeg Arts Council, The Winnipeg Foundation, and the Canada Council for the Arts.



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