

“Organization of Appearances”¹: Presence and Spectacle in “Instagrammable” Experience Spaces

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Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* written in 1967 reads like prophecy as he describes an image obsessed world which fetishizes appearance, commodity, and the constant generation of an ahistorical present. While his text could not have foreseen Instagram or social media, he understood the ramifications of a society where “social relations between people are mediated by images” (§ 4). For Debord, the spectacle is a totalizing regime that materializes an objective worldview (§ 5) which serves to continually reaffirm and justify the choices made by the dominant mode of production (§ 6). However, *within* the spectacle there are tensions between presence and absence (§ 37), being and appearing (§ 17), as well as reality and image (§ 7). In each of these relationships the first term is transformed into the second through a loss; what Theodor Adorno calls a “forgetting” (Adorno & Benjamin 321). This presentation intends to explore these tensions by examining the excesses and absences of “Instagram-optimized” (Wiener) experience spaces, arguing that they embody the reification that is at the heart of Debord’s conceptualization of the spectacle.

A variety of pop-up immersive experiences began touring North America in the wake of *The Museum of Ice Cream’s* 2016 success. Targeting the 72% of millennials willing to “increase their spending on experiences rather than physical things” (Harris Interactive), this market has expanded to include a multitude of attractions dedicated to providing their patrons with the eye-popping object-filled installations in order to help them get that perfect “Instagrammable” picture. Thematically dedicated to everything from money to eggs, they are billed as spaces to “connect people and spread joy” (Museum of Ice Cream) by fostering tactile real-life interaction, pleasure, and play. Places like *The Color Factory*, *Happy Place*, and *The Museum of Pizza* bring together marketing firms, corporate sponsors, and artists to produce exhibits which repurpose *The Museum of Ice Cream’s* successful format—including the now ubiquitous ball-pit—toward new motifs.

Yet, despite the ever-increasing variety of themes around which these pop-up’s are constructed, they all share a predilection for attempting to dwarf their patrons and surround them in vividly aestheticized spaces. *Happy Place* has a room entirely patterned with chocolate chip cookies (Figure 1) in which a single oversized plastic version of one is situated, like a shrine, at the head of the room; *Candytopia* has a foam marshmallow pool (Figure 2) that one can sink into, and *The Museum of Ice Cream* confronts those who enter with massive glossy pink ice cream cone fans (Figure 3). In each, the scale of objects is increased exponentially, and colour is intensified. Foods which are traditionally small, and consumable are transformed into sculptural objects which dominate whole rooms.

These oversized fabrications which glorify food are present in variety of pop-ups. Yet, any relationship with the material history or labour associated with the production of these goods is absent. Ice-cream becomes disconnected from cows or nourishment, situated in a “museum” whose website explicitly warns interested parties not to expect history lessons (Museum of Ice

¹ This title borrows from Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, § 10.

Cream). *The Egg House* celebrates eggs divorced from any connection to chickens, fertilization and gestation, or farming (Figure 4). Food, something which is inherently political and connected to complex networks of industry and culture, is presented as a series of ahistorical objects which seem to symbolize timeless labourless abundance.

This is suggestive of what Debord cites as the first priority of spectacular domination which is to “eradicate historical knowledge in general” (§ 13) and is indicative of the process of reification. Adorno writes “objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten” (Adorno & Benjamin 321). The intentional stripping of historicity from food complies with the ontological fallacy of commodity fetishism: “the mistaking of historical ‘becoming’ for natural ‘being’” (Hartle 27). The forgetting of process imbues these spaces with an eternal present, because both being-within-time and becoming necessitate some notion of care towards the world (Ricoeur 171) and recognition of historicity. An egg that is deterritorialized from the conditions of its production and lifecycle, is an egg without a history or a future. It’s symbolic relationship with vital potential is dissolved and what is left is an object which can only be described in the infinitive.

These foods are transformed into simulacra: copies of copies “whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no longer properly be said to be a copy” (Massumi). Yet, these objects—which seem to have a little more than superficial relationship with their models—maintain a material vibrancy, even if it is an atomistic one. Brian Massumi notes that:

“A copy, no matter how many times removed, authentic or fake, is defined by the presence or absence of internal, essential relations of resemblance to a model. The simulacrum, on the other hand, bears only an external and deceptive resemblance to a putative model. The process of its production, its inner dynamism, is entirely different from that of its supposed model; its resemblance to it is merely a surface effect, an illusion” (45-56).

This summarization of Gilles Deleuze’s argumentation from *Plato and the Simulacra*, unsurprisingly bestows a high value on difference. The similarity between the simulacrum and its model is framed as being less significant than the qualitative changes made between the original and the copy; Deleuze argues that “resemblance can only be thought of as the product of internal difference” (52). However, this statement that would seem to suggest that one’s view of the simulacrum depends on a perceptual preference for seeing difference instead of similarity, since resemblance requires both.

Despite this perhaps illusory relationship between simulacrum and model, a link persists. While one recognizes that the giant cookie is not in fact a real cookie, the resemblance creates an unbreakable connection between the two and makes the simultaneous recognition of presence and absence unavoidable. The link between the real and the simulacrum is maintained by an acknowledgement of what has—and has not—changed. First, by way of reification: the intentional transformation of an object from the small and edible into large and inedible whilst preserving appearance; and secondly via a shift in the mode of that production which substitutes baking for plastic and fiberglass fabrication. Cookies, ice-cream, and marshmallows are made

spectacular as they are transformed into images of themselves and, as such, they embody the tensions of the spectacle, which:

“falsifies reality [but] is nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides. Each of these seemingly fixed concepts has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real” (Debord § 6).

The model foods are signified by the simulacra and the simulacra are present in the mass-produced commercial goods they take as their model. Neither is entirely separated from the other because both are ubiquitous in western culture from plastic play-foods designed toddlers to the grocery store cookie aisle.

As a result of this, the immersive experiences, that are meant to “save you from the busy concrete city” (The Egg House) through the construction of a division between the real and the pop-up, bring the subject into the spectacular. Debord describes this process as “the material reconstruction of the religious illusion . . . The illusory paradise that represented a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens; it is embedded in earthly life itself. The spectacle is the technological version of the exiling of human powers into a “world beyond”; the culmination of humanity's internal separation” (Debord § 20). Pop-up spaces actively separate themselves from the “real” world though their attempts at generating a kind of nostalgia for the oversaturated colours and synthetic foods that were childhood pleasures in an effort to create another world, different from the banality of everyday life. The “world beyond” in this context is a land of plenty where consumption and the consumable are indicative of a life beyond the limitations of the profane where appetite knows no bounds.

This underscores the difference between spaces like the carnival, funhouse, or art installation and these pop-ups. While all attempt to separate themselves from the everyday through spatial immersion, the carnival, funhouse, and installation engender some form of unsettlement, some change in being between the outside and the inside. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the medieval carnival as being imbued with a “temporal suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time, a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” (11). The modern funhouse seeks to unsettle the subject’s relationship with space via visual illusion, bodily sensation, and physical obstacles. Totalizing art installations like those of Yayoi Kusama—whose work is often mimicked by these pop-ups (Hess) --unsettles via confrontation of the sublime in the case of *Infinity Mirrors* or the repetitive patterns of *Obliteration Room* that simulate “a recurring hallucination she first experienced as a child” (Kusama & Munroe 32). In each of these examples’ immersion leads to temporary alteration of being in relation to society, space, or perception.

However, reviewers of these pop-up’s describe their experiences within as “bleak”, “dystopian” (Dooley), and “a masochistic march through voids of meaning” (Hess) in “line adjacent experiences” (Dooley). The freedom and fun described in marketing pitches is largely absent, as is any sense alteration of perception or being. Tatum Dooley narrates how the rooms

of *Happy Place* “come with enforced rules. [In which] lines are formed, though they move quickly enough because, in some cases, each group is given about forty-five seconds to take pictures. When participants get to the ball pit, they are told that they are only allowed to jump in once” (Dooley). It is clear these experience spaces are not ones of childlike wonder, nor are they somehow more ominous than an amusement park or theme restaurant. Baudrillard calls this the “Disneyland imaginary” which is not the creation of a false reality but instead conceals “that the real is no longer real” (Baudrillard 25) and that “we live everywhere already in an “aesthetic” hallucination of reality” (143).

As such, the pop-up experience acts as an affirmation of the “choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. In both form and content, the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system” (Debord § 6). The overwhelming celebration of consumption, and the worship of commercialized goods as object does not seek to problematize the reification present or the society in which they were generated. Instead these spaces are stripped of any political or social criticism. Even media company Refinery29’s touring exhibit *29rooms*—whose content veers away playful food and toward individual self-empowerment by engaging in the visual rhetoric of political critique—avoids questioning the system that created an absence of empowerment in the first place. This can be seen in *Values Stand* (Figure 5), which is intended to promote voter registration (Salazar). The installation’s mock news-stand is covered with posted bills with words like, “activism”, “contact your local officials”, “show up” and “rights”. Despite the bold letters and interspersed imagery of the raised fist, the stand is overwhelmingly politically neutral. It demands that action be taken, but the impetus behind that action is conspicuously absent.

This reflects the “contemplative stance” John Hartel argues is an integral aspect of the spectacle:

Generalized separation is the way in which the spectacle operates, leaving individual subjects in the state of pure contemplation, separated from the conditions of one’s own practice and relation to the collective: The spectacle introduces a self-perception based on objectified and individuated reality rather than collective self-constitution (30).

This separation is the outcome of the tensions present in “global social practice [being] split into reality and image” (Debord § 7). Jacques Rancière considers this to be the essence of the spectacle: the creation of “exteriority. The spectacle is the reign of vision, and vision is exteriority—that is self-dispossession (6). These processes are a further example of the reification inherently within Debord’s spectacle. Axel Honneth argues that antecedent stance of reification is “empathetic engagement and recognition” (128), something which is made difficult by constant exteriority to and separation from a sense of shared experience. The *Values Stand* reencodes this division between individual politics and any relationship with the collective by encouraging participatory action divorced from issues, policy, or common good. Rights for whom? Activism towards what end? The absence of specifics allows the subject to fill in the gaps in a way that suits them best and reaffirms pre-existing social attitudes. The installation does not speak to the public as a collective body, but instead directly to each individual.

Similarly, Refinery29's *The Money Matters* (Figure 6) installation celebrates the liberation and empowerment of being a subject of capitalism. The golden pyramid stacked with piggybanks stands in front of a wall with "I know my worth" written in capital letters, along with other phrases like "I give myself permission to be financially secure". Here, wealth and economic freedom are framed as a choice and a marker of individual empowerment. Self-worth and net-worth are conflated as value simultaneously refers to qualitative as well as the quantitative measures, the latter being proportional to one's possession of capital. Like within Georg Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*, here commodity generates an "abstract quantitative mode of calculability" (93) which serves to conceal the process of objectification within subjective self-evaluation. The assessment of one's own worth is reified as it is made calculable (91). The neoliberal meritocratic fantasy of a singular being who, through tenacity and fortitude, is able to scale the piggybank pyramid through small incremental savings is demonstrated here and has the implicit message that all poverty or prosperity is related solely to individual choice. This celebration of "being before the market" (Badiou 10) extends to other pop-up's which have, like Refinery29, branded themselves feminist; *That Lady Thing* features a booth where participants can frantically grab at prop-money that is being blown in the air, and at *Stacks House* one can ride a mechanical bull in the shape of a piggybank and pose in front of a heart comprised of dollar signs.

In each of these examples the spectacle can be seen in the "omnipresent affirmation" and "total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system" (Debord § 6) which are present in these installations. Empowerment is here not achieved through collective liberation or action, but instead through an individual subjects' relationship with capital, where security is an act of winning: grabbing more money than other participants or staying on a bucking-bronco that is as erratic as the market. The "vicious cycle of isolation" (Debord 28) inherent within the contemplative stance and separation of the one from the many is "the quintessence of contemporary capitalism, which produces separated spectators at the moment that it brings them together" (Bottici 115). The tensions between individual and collective, through separation produced by the spectacle, express the excesses and absences of this experience. While *29rooms* markets itself as an "a place to dance, paint, think, make new friends, give a damn. . .an invitation to dream bigger" (Refinery 29), the works speak to atomized individuals who may share a spatial relationship within the pop-up, but whose interactions are often primarily navigated via Instagram and other social media platforms.

Yet, it is in the role of the spectator that Rancière problematizes the divisions within Debord's conceptualization of the spectacle. Debord's text assumes the possibility of an essential, unmediated, and authentic experience which is lost as social reality is made false. Rancière observes that this means that the "situation of those who live in the society of the spectacle it thus identical to that of the shackled prisoners in Plato's cave" (44). In opposition to this Rancière argues:

being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed. . .we do not have to transform spectators into actors, and

ignoramus into scholars. We have to recognize the knowledge at work . . . every spectator is already an actor in her own story (17).

For Rancière, the spectator is not shackled or relegated to the world of illusion, because their relationship with what surrounds them is an active one, as they continually synthesize experience within the context of their own being. Moreover, it shifts responsibility onto the public to acknowledge this role. This is in direct contrast to Debord's rhetoric of public oppression under the spectacular regime, which denies the capacity of that public to recognize the obviousness of its influence, turning them into quasi-mindless victims (Rancière 46). It is a characterization of the subject that he develops further in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in which he examines the use of spectacular means to control politics and enact domination in hidden ways.

However, neither Rancière's emancipated spectator, nor Debord's seemingly oppressed one take into account what Jodi Dean calls "communicative capitalism"; defining it as "the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism" (2), Dean begins to negotiate a media space that is no longer characterized by the unidirectional broadcasting that was prevalent when Debord published his works on the spectacle. The multidirectional interactive potentials of social media mean one is a producer of images and content, not just a passive receiver who has only a "one-way relationship to the very center" (Debord 29).

Communicative capitalism is evident within these pop-ups as participants who pay for entry simultaneously function as largely unpaid labour. As patrons post and share images of their experiences they are also marketing the space—not to mention generating content and meta-data for their chosen platform. The evolving relationship between the spectator, social media, and aesthetic experience that has accompanied the rise of Instagram has also made this passive form of immaterial labour ubiquitous. The act of sharing images of these experiences is an integral aspect of the way experience spaces are marketed. The pop-up capitalizes on their patrons' collective interest in generating 'instagrammable' content and the inclination to disperse that content. The success of this strategy, like so many viral marketing campaigns, hinges on a plethora of individuals within a network sharing the same content, because "repetition produces value; repeated references and likes by friends and strangers mark something as valuable, as worth visiting" (Chun 118).

The unabashedly commercial interests expressed by these experience spaces situate the locus of encounter between individual, collective, and object within the spectacular. The divisions within Debord's conceptualization of that spectacle produce social relationships that are mediated and reified by image production and consumption. The tensions between presence and absence within this dynamic are embodied by experience, which has the power to potentially generate objective, individuated, and reified interactions, or subjective, shared, empathetic recognition. While Debord's theory does not place the responsibility for making that choice on the subject, I think it's necessary to acknowledge the agency of the participant, and that the generation of alterity and critical engagement can occur within the society of the spectacle. While *The Egg House*, *The Museum of Ice Cream*, *Happy Place* and others do not seek to generate this form of discourse—and instead reaffirm the dominant values of capitalism—they are a site

where aesthetic experience enters the world of commodity through the staging of spectacle and as such, provide a demonstration of the complex relationships that generate absence and presence.

Appendix

Figure 1.



Paul, Jared. Cookie Room, *Happy Place*, Touring popup, 2017.

Figure 2.



Sorkin, Jackie. Marshmallow Pool, *Candytopia*, touring pop-up, 2019.

Figure 3.



Bunn, Maryellis. *Museum of Icecream*, New York City, 2016.

Figure 4.



Xu, Biubiu. *The Egg House*, New York City, 2018.

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