

**“We’re Lost in Music”:
Disco as Fantasy, and the Spectrality
of Mediated Memory in Josi Smit’s
*We Should Be Dancing***

by Morris Fox

We Should Be Dancing
Josi Smit

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Desire will take you through the day (oncidium shadow dream 2023), Josi Smit



Desire will take you through the day (oncidium shadow dream 1977), Josi Smit

We Should Be Dancing, artist Josi Smit's installation at Forest City Gallery in London, ON, delves into a body of work centred around the hauntings of Disco dance culture, and personal memories of this era shared with the artist by her Maman. Situated in video, kinetic soft sculpture, lens-based work, and sculptural forms, Smit engages with themes of fantasy and escape, memory and loss, and the empowering feeling of Disco, transcending disillusionment through fantasy. The exhibition remedies the captivating stories of Maman's dancing-queen days of the mid to late 1970's: these memories intimately connect Smit to this period of her Maman's young life as she reflects on the challenges of precarious work and the anxieties of contemporary living, much like her Maman did in her dancing queen twenties.

Disco, a mixed cultural form that emerged in a time characterised by social and political change, economic and ecological anxieties, and a sense of disillusionment, allowed for individuals to escape their everyday worries, to find solace, kinship, and liberation in the dance. Disco became a space where people could immerse themselves in worlds of glamorous fantasy. Looking back at the Disco era through her Maman's storytelling, film depictions of Disco such as *Saturday Night Fever*, and other mediated artefacts, music and fashion, Smit's installation takes these fragments—and her feelings of expected and realised loss of them—to a space of reimagination and wonder. In *We Should Be Dancing*, Disco is reflected not only in haunted sounds and shimmering possibilities, but as movement, where a sense of temporal dislocation creates an uncanny blur of Disco's past, Smit's present, and our shared, troubled future. Smit's spectral echoes recall Jacques Derrida's hauntology, understanding the allure of Disco and its continued haunting of our contemporary experiences.

Resisting the banality and normalised nostalgia that haunts Disco's otherwise radical imaginary of liberation, Smit preserves the sensation of memories of dancing kept alive by her Maman's stories. *We Should Be Dancing* reminds me that fantasy offers up something different, as writer Tim Lawrence

chronicles in *Love Saves the Day*: “if the party won’t cure the problems of the world, it might still be the place where we can begin to imagine a new one ... the night still shimmers with a utopian hope that daylight has yet to deliver” (Lawrence, 441). Disco evokes a queer nostalgia, transporting me in imagination to a shimmering bygone era—one which exists, in its depictions, as more of a fantasy than cultural memory. An era of Queer and Black culture preserved in oral history was nonetheless suburbanized, white-washed, commercialised, and straightened into compulsive heteropatriarchal lines, like *Saturday Night Fever’s* regressive fantasy of a man leading his female partner across the light-up tiles (Lawrence, 2004, 304-7). Yet queer dance remains: as a haunted imaginary, as ephemera, as a cascade of reflections bouncing off the Disco ball, creating ripples.

For Josi Smit’s large-scale diptych, *Desire will take you through the day*, two photographic images hang next to each other. One image, (*oncidium shadow dream 1977*), is from an archive of Maman’s youth, a photograph of her getting ready to go out to the Disco, the other, (*oncidium shadow dream 2023*), is a self-portrait taken by the artist re-enacting the same pose, dressed in the same body suit, re-creating the archival gesture. The diptych creates a blurring of time linking Smit to the memory of her Maman’s Disco days. Re-printing the family and re-enacted photographs using the same method and size renders the images as twin and anachronistic, an ambiguity which is further enriched by the materials used to frame the images. They are printed on a clear film, set within deep shadow boxes that are also light boxes: wooden frames patterned to resemble parquet flooring, a staple of Disco-era interiors. Behind the photographic film lie abstracted ephemera re-creations, like wireframe images of fuchsia flowers, dance cards, and silk orchids registered as soft silhouettes. Like the shadows of moths dancing across the images, they complicate their solidity and the memories within the frame, creating a spectral effect. The work of recalling a memory, especially one which is not from one’s own lived experience, the materiality of *Desire will take you through the day* makes me feel like I’m chasing something that isn’t quite

there, an absent presence. I read into the diptych a yearning for the two subjects to get ready for a night out together—a fantasy which lies outside of the present tense, but that is not necessarily within the past either, an instance of recall that is impossible yet intimate.

This queer labour of imagination is a type of memory work that reminds me of José Van Dijck’s *Mediated Memory in the Digital Age*, where he speaks of personal remembrance: “memory is an affective feeling that accompanies our seeing a picture or a mental picture we have formed in our minds. To the extent that emotions inform our memories, the stuff of memory may be partly derived from the external object itself [like a photograph] ... and partly from the construction the brain makes of it” (Van Dijck, 33-34). The link between the objects that elicit memories, what should be remembered, how that makes me feel, also connect to how imagination recreates memories in our minds. Smit plays with this fusional quality between memory and fantasy. The work queues in my head title lines from Sylvester’s *You Make Me Feel, (Mighty Real)*, marks a feeling of alignment and slippage between generations. I feel towards a slippage of time and bodies, reading for family resemblances as an act of fascination, an action that is traced not only within the telling of stories but also within Disco music itself. *Desire will take you through the day* aligns Smit with her Maman at the same age and across time as a sort of drag, as a fantasy, an escape from precarious work, rising rent, the cares and worries that occupy time within the daylight hours. At night, getting ready to go out, Smit’s diptych reminds me of Disco’s astonishing feeling of fantasy, of wonder.

The fusional layers of Smit’s work echo writer Sara Ahmed’s emphasis on remembering to wonder. Speaking to the repetition of a form, of a knowledge, of a family, of the familiar, that when queered allows for something different to take place, Ahmed writes: “to wonder is to remember the forgetting and to see the repetition of form as the ‘taking form’” (Ahmed, 82). Wonder is also an escape, to Disco/ nnect, to wander off, to be immersed through fantasy and

dance, flowing into the trance-like communion of the Disco fragments that Smit mediates. A yearning to keep dancing with the haunted glimmers of Disco light reflects and amplifies into the space of the installation, like samples in which we can cite each other, we instance ourselves in the work, as moments lost in the dance. The repetition jams the frequency of loss, forgetting paradoxically takes on form, becomes. In the retelling, the loop, the unfamiliarity that comes with touching a family photo that I'm not part of, yet feel kinship with, connects me to the figment of a legacy, feels as much like kinship as having a real relationship to its memory object. This affectual touch conjures Roland Barthes' musings at the Paris Disco theatre Le Palace: "I am not obliged to dance in order to sustain a living relationship with this site. Alone, or at least somewhat apart, I can dream" (Barthes, 47). Dreams are like a sequence of meanings waiting to be transmitted, are like being lost in a club, searching for someone to dance with for a song or two, to sustain a living relationship with the site of memory, there's queues in Smit's work that chase the ephemera left by Maman, but also Smit's own experiences of Disco. Blurring fact and fiction mirrors the fantastical and phantasmic qualities of memory triggered through objects and their affective associations.

Josi Smit's array of lightbox sculptures, *I saw her dancing, a dream in cathode-ray static*, crafted in the shape of vintage television sets, weave together photographs of her Maman's getting ready to go out, in the Disco scene of Ottawa/Hull, with found images of discotheque interiors that dissolve the boundaries of self and space. They mirror the experience of getting lost in the trance of the dancefloor, poignantly positioning an overlapping of images that flicker with desire for a memory that is just out of reach. Mounted on glass mirror tiled tables, the sculptures recall a familiar intimacy with their subject, but an impossibility at the same time: a generational gap that, like the diptych, is bridged via the transparency of layers accreted in the lightboxes. The images that are assembled blur into each other, scanned as a shimmer across time. Trans media theorist Eliza Steinbock speaks in *Shimmering Images* to the capacity of the shimmer

to hold multiple and complex layers of meaning: "the shifting scintillations of the shimmering boundary refuse to settle embodied or cinematic images into the diction of true or false, fantasy or actuality... shimmering suggests a suspension of being either really there or not there, of being fully graspable. To become situated in the shimmering of these boundaries opens up another way of knowing that does not rely on visual certainty. Shimmering suspends epistemological disbelief" (Steinbock, 17). *I saw her dancing, a dream in cathode-ray static* shimmer as they transform and shift between the layers of Maman's Somerset living spaces and La Disco Viva's interior. The personal family photograph becomes a cultural artefact shimmering as an invitation to go out dancing. Slips of temporalities and bodies come into being.

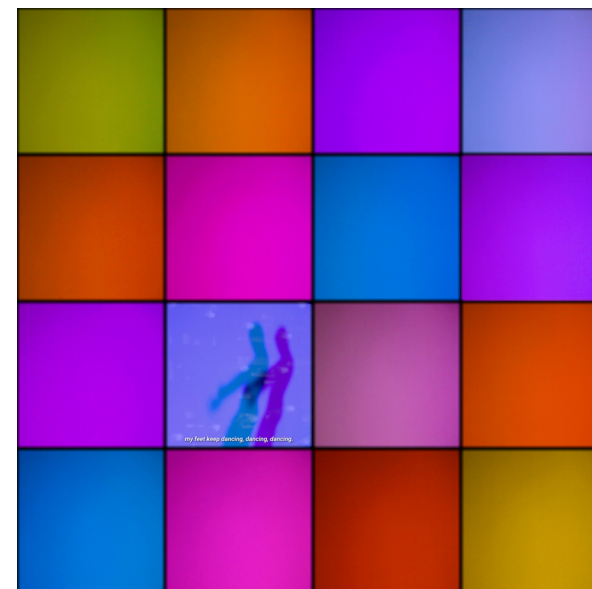
Smit's soft sculptures, *Spun by Sterling, we dissolved into moth wings in the spotlight*, an array of five kaftan shroud textile pieces, spin slowly on Disco ball motors, hung to float just above the ground while twirling. They slowly move like silent ghostly dance partners, in a pair and a trio, spinning like moths drawn to the dance, to the flame. To produce the fabric prints, Smit captured screen stills from *Saturday Night Fever*, a suburban fantasy of Disco, whitewashed and heteronormalised, a fiction. As a popular cultural memory, the film becomes an imperfect conduit into Disco, an ephemeral connection that lives in fantasy rather than archived past. In Smit's shroud-like prints, film become apparitional, rendered spectral. Fused into the fibres are fragments of dancing, abstract spectres of Disco sublimated into the chiffon garments. Scan lines from the captured cathode-ray tube screen-stills are registered, and in the doubling of the garment create a moiré pattern. What results is an optical effect where the movement of a semi-transparent object moves across another one. This overlap creates an interference, registering a third pattern that isn't physically present in the objects. In conversation with the artist, the visual sensation recalls pressing up against an analogue television, watching the dance of static and dots of moving images waver and blur. The kaftan shrouds are reminiscent of the designs of Halston and Stephen Burrows, fashion

designers who were part of the Disco scene and emphasised the flow of a garment moving with a dancer's body. Kaftans shimmer in movement, diaphanous, dancing with their embodied partner, not fabricated for a specific body-type or gender, but for the glide of vibrant and glimmering fabric. The images from *Saturday Night Fever* become, in the chiffon shrouds, completely blown out into a wash of colours, a cloud of abstract motion, almost like the blur of a photograph as it tries to register a dancing figure. Smit's *Spun by Sterling, we dissolved into moth wings in the spotlight* memorialise a moment of Disco that is perhaps already lost: a memorial in anticipation, a melancholic desire that these garments could be more than a cloak of memory, that they could spin and dance with us. The kaftans may be shrouds, ghost dancers, the ones we've lost—all the people we don't get to dance with but who we want to dance with anyways.

The garments that create a glimmer of motion through *Spun by Sterling, we dissolved into moth wings in the spotlight* also recall a yearning for lost time and a particular fantasy: what if I could also be at the Disco, trans-temporally transported through time and space? An immaterial material that emphasises the space around them, I recall the empty and negative blank spaces between the shrouds as ghost dancers. We can dance with both these spatial and shroud forms, getting lost in their slow rotations. This feeling of getting lost is itself an instance of re-orientation—perhaps towards desire and pleasure, equally a tightening of the body as it falls into the unknown, forgets its way, stranges the familiar. Smit's kaftans spin, recalling Disco anthems' haunted refrains, like the Addrissi Brothers' *Ghost Dancer*: "When he starts spinning/Under the mirrored ball...You get the strangest feeling/Someone else is there." The dancing shrouds let us lose ourselves in their moment, echoing art historian Douglas Crimp's *Disss-co*: "you danced a last dance or two, and as the sun really began to pour into the room you saw that your surroundings weren't so magical after all...and you were happy enough to return to your regular life... [but] it took 'days to adjust to ugly reality'" (Crimp, 16-17). Smit's ghost dancers share a last dance or two, the disco/mfort of



I saw her dancing, a dream in cathode-ray static (la disco viva in maman's somerset dining nook), Josi Smit



Dancing dancing, our feet keep dancing dancing dancing through the night until morning light shines on us (a rumour has it that it's getting late), Josi Smit

renegotiating ugly reality and the loss of feeling that extends in the trance of dance, of the fantasy that lingers. We yearn for just a bit more lost time, the lingering of bodies that dance in the dark, that forget time until you leave the dance and enter into the morning light, the mourning light that sobers and saddens the colours of a contour of space, of an impression pressed to its impression. Dancing disco/mfort admixed with pleasure, with trance, is a Disco sequence that loops back to Sara Ahmed: “this case of discomfort is enabled by a sense of wonder. Rather than just seeing the familiar, which of course means that it passes from view, I felt wonder and surprise... to wonder is to remember the forgetting” (Ahmed, 82). Smit, like Ahmed, carries me along lines of affinity, of the family, of resemblance and semblances, queered by misalignment, by asynchrony. I am drawn into temporal-spatial orientations that Josi Smit samples through disco/mfort to find something else, perhaps something that wasn't there before, while overlapping a moiré mesh of her personal familiar, a familiar that becomes eerie, queered.

I reflect on Smit's shadow dancing video, *Dancing dancing, our feet keep dancing dancing dancing through the night until morning light shines on us (a rumour has it that it's getting late)*, in relationship to self-dance: how to dance with myself, but also how to self-dance in space—points of contact where I interact and engage with the fragments of Disco song lyrics, navigating and trying to find my own reciprocity within and without the Discotheque, finding the minor registrations of space, seeking play in the space that fantasy offers, imagining who I might find on the dancefloor to be my partner for the night. I think about the dynamics of power which can cause disco/mfort, but also how shadows play host to reciprocation, hold onto more than how the light shimmers across a grid, cast a projected shadow dancer, create a melancholic feeling. Smit's dancing shadow evokes a feeling of wonder, and in that wonder “remember[s] the forgetting” (Ahmed, 82). Smit's video installation suggests a shared manifestation. To manifest—re: make strange, haunt—to feel again differently, to find in the silence of the work, the stillness of the tiles resting between actions, another type of communion, a

time for wonder. Like in Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, Smit's shadow dancers try to keep dancing even after the day has come, “when everyone converged at an after-hours club ... where the people who could not stop went, who artificially extended the night by remaining in rooms whose windows were painted with black paint, where the dregs of night, the bartenders, the discaires [DJs] themselves, all tumbled into one room in which pretensions were impossible. The bathroom was jammed with people sharing drugs, drag queens danced with designers, hustlers played pool, sharing another kind of communion, til hours later... the light glowing in the ribs of the ventilating fan over the door ... gave away the whole fiction, the pretense that it was still night, and proved not only that day had come, but it was maturing rapidly—and I would wonder in the sudden stillness” (Holleran, 117). Smit revisits her earlier shadow dance work, here arranged as a grid of colorful squares resembling light-up Disco flooring. In this arrangement, the dancers appear and vanish from individual video tiles, rather than playing simultaneously. The piece is silent, but subtitles play the lyrics from Disco songs, fragments that hint at the shadows speaking lyrics, sampling more shadows.

Smit's *We should Be Dancing* works through the yearning to hold onto something, to sample it before it is lost. In *Rhythm Science*, Paul d. Miller talks about sampling as an anachronism, out of time: “it's all about the changing same ... The samples and fragments speak the unspoken, the ascent remains unbroken ... Sampling plays with different perceptions of time. Sampling allows people to replay their own memories of the sounds and situations of their lives ... sampling is dematerialized sculpture” (Miller, 28-29). Sampling plays with the repetition of forms that arrive in Smit's oeuvre, rematerializing the spectrality of an embodied slip between instances of time, memory, space, attuned to the pleasure of the residue. How slippery memory is; we get lost in the dance: “Sampling that is like sending a fax to yourself from the sonic debris of a possible future; the cultural permutations of tomorrow, heard today, beyond the corporeal limits of the imagination” (Miller, 77). Sampling is perhaps like

trying to find where lines of inquiry and reference intersect, where citation blurs between imagination and what physically remains, the debris of a shimmering, listening to the loop of the quotation—as it slips away, as it flees—as if a loss, wonder.

In the fragments of lyrics that play as silent subtitles in *Dancing dancing, our feet keep dancing dancing dancing through the night until morning light shines on us (a rumour has it that it's getting late)*, I get a glimpse of the Disco songs and bands referenced, such as Sylvester, Donna Summers, CHIC. Music that sounds sweet and catchy on the surface is camp, but is also hauntological, becoming eerie in its loop. Smit's sampling of lyrics speaks to something melancholic, speaks to an escapism to and on the dancefloor, a night-time fantasy of dance that vanishes, dissolves in harsh daylight. Like CHIC's *Est-Ce-Que C'est Chic* dirges, "every night it's the same old dream, rehearsing lines for tomorrow's scenes, but it's real in the morning babe." Disco lyrics subvert the pleasure of a night out, haunted by what happens in the morning. I find a ghost imaginary, echoes of songs completed in memory rather than heard sound. Smit plays with this imaginary in the silence of the space. She calls attention to the haunting lyrics of Disco songs, their gothic undertones connecting to lost time, urgency, melancholy, escapism, and fantasy. The lyrics harken back and pay homage to Queer and BIPOC communities, who flocked to and fashioned Disco for survival. Fantasy is a survival method. There's a queer glamour accessed in Disco's night dance: you're an icon on the dance floor but then you re-enter reality afterwards. Survival is a dance, keep on dancing dancing.

I see a connection between Disco's hauntology with tropes of goth and punk scenes, a sort of no-future-but-now impulse that is freeing in its pleasure. The Trammp's *Disco Inferno* "Satisfaction came in a chain reaction (Burnin') I couldn't get enough, so I had to self-destruct," comes to mind not only as an example of this hauntological impulse to derive a melancholic pleasure from expected loss, where the future crowds into the present, but crackling with queer potentiality.

We Should Be Dancing reverberates as a depth of field, as theorist Eshun Kodwo writes: "it's crowded with crackle, seething, heaving, teeming with wraiths deprived of definition, lost from history, jostling for space." (Eshun, 66). Disco's counter-culture holds the queer potential to find liberation despite day-to-day reality's attempts to clip your wings. It serves as an empowering space of fantasy founded by and for Black Queer communities as a disco/nnect from compulsory hetero-patriarchal society—more radically, to affect change in the world, to create echoes, to crowd in. Even if it's just to chase the phantom of the dance for one more weekend out, keep burnin'. Yet what Peter Shapiro in *Turn the Beat Around* eloquently captures: "Disco was at once about community and individual pleasure, sensation and alienation, orgy and sacrifice; it promised both liberation and constraint, release and restraint, frivolity and doom. Disco was both utopia and hell" (Shapiro, 30). There is a longing to experience being glamorous and iconic on the dance floor, recalling jouissance or pleasure, yet the fantasy is excessive, fleeting. The affirmation of Disco, roleplaying the fantasy, is tied back to the communities who partake in it. In the silence of Smit's installation I become attuned to crackling, the echoes and crowds that affect me through this haunt of imagination and memory—queering past, present, and future.

The radical possibility of the dancefloor is that it does more than simply fantasise or re-create pleasure. Going to a contemporary Disco night offers more than an escape into nostalgia. *We Should Be Dancing* reminds me that in the language of dance, rehearsed together, we find affectual attachments that cross through each other, cross through time. Lingering feelings attempt to become one, even if that one-ness is impossible to grasp, even if we are always dancing alone. This possibility, even if phantasmagorical, is not only a shimmer of queer possibility, but an inflection of ghostly communion, a spectrality that shades the movement of the Disco dancer. It shadows the repetitions and rhythms of co-dancers; the dancers become a medium of memory, memorial, through which the visitor to *We Should be Dancing* passes in relay, a relay between the work that re-enacts the

dance and the visitor as a ghostly trace of movement, tranced in becoming. Smit's work recalls a dual experience of identity, the echo of someone else's experience through their imperfect translation of memory vis-à-vis film, and the tactility of touching Disco through the personal traces that remain: photographs, garments, memories passed on through conversation. This affective exchange is a sort of distant touch, a spectral graze with knowing glances. Smit's remediation, making again, of the feelings evoked for her through Maman's dancing queen era, and the ephemeral memory objects re-enacted and performed in the work resonates with José Esteban Muñoz's contention of what queer acts are, working with what remains after the party is over. He speaks to this framing as "Ephemera ... all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself ... following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things" (Muñoz, 10).

We Should Be Dancing follows the glimmers of residues scattered across family lines, diffused in memory—the traces of us fused to garments, to memory objects. Importantly, Smit's work refracts and makes fantastic the Disco where the artist isn't only dancing for herself, but for the ghosts that haunt the frame of the now phantasmic discotheque. Re-enactment becomes not only a way to re-engage with the past, but is queer labour, memory work. Smit's *We Should Be Dancing* speaks to the desire to find the nuance of self-discovery through resampling the family archive, the scenes of her Maman's Disco era, and recreating the atmosphere of trying to dance backwards in time. Smit's work also speaks to the precarity of this doubling, to find eerily trances and traces, contours of self out of its perceived boundaries of time. Just out of grasp, yet shadows touch shadow as billowing dancers lost in a hall of mirrors, as the lyrics of Sister Sledge's *Lost in Music* remind us, "We're lost in music (don't take away our music)."

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