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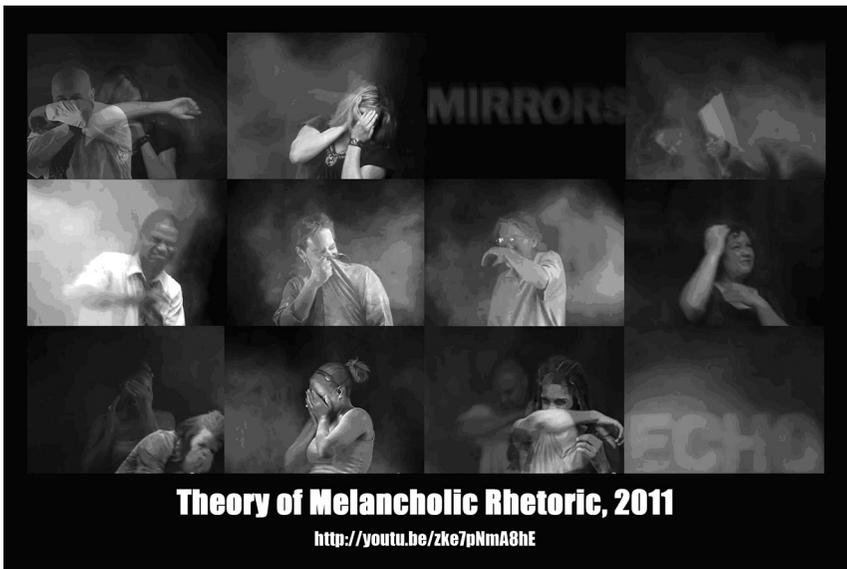
Theory of Melancholic Rhetoric is an arts-based critical reflection on the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, as a global image event. Memory fragments and traces linger from mass media coverage. Menacing dust plumes enveloped downtown Manhattan as they overcame the bodies of screaming people sprinting through city streets. Their fine particles imprinted onto internationally shared grey matter, becoming a global image. A decade later, non-subjective mental image residue remains in a publicly constructed consciousness, revealing its representations in seemingly private non-objective inner worlds of individual memories held by world spectators (Arendt, 1968; Ferguson, 1999).

In aesthetics, melancholy is an aesthetic emotional construct striking a harmonious balance between the dualism of sorrow and joy (Brady & Haapala, 2003). In cultural studies, the theory of melancholic rhetoric refers to repetitious depiction of melancholy citizens during the “War on Terror” framed as a “commonsense” cultural narrative (Biesecker, 2007). In rhetoric, a false analogy associates melancholy with mourning. The loss of life from over 100 countries on 9/11 (true mourning) is conflated with a fictitious and imaginary loss of democratic freedom (melancholy, false “loss”). Melancholic rhetoric is productive of a political will and ideological grounding within mainstream American culture that is oriented toward bearing pre-emptive arms and fighting an ongoing, never-ending war to maintain neoliberal consumer capitalism.

Welsch (1997) expresses the possibility of developing an aestheticized culture that is sensitive to differences and exclusions in daily life and social forms, suggesting an aesthetic potential capable of contributing to political culture. Utilizing

video-based methods for visual inquiry and critical reflection, this project places theoretical concepts into conversation. Textual additions subvert and connote the reconstructed, performative images emergent as representations of private mental images associated with 9/11. Visual and textual associations call attention to the complex relationship between mass media, image rhetoric, aestheticization of public consciousness, and cultural politics. An ominous chiming audio track abstracted from the 2011 “Royal Wedding” image event includes banal voiceover of fashion reporters who glamorize the privileged status of the monarchy. The audio and video tracks enter into their own discursive relation, referencing pop cultural celebration, meta-narratives of historical power, and enduring trans-political economic disparities on a global scale.

To what extent is consciousness aestheticized, our memories mediated visual fragments unwittingly shared across a global consciousness? Are our fragmented mental images, phantasmagoria, and traces manufactured by hegemonic discourses of verbal and visual rhetoric (Barthes, 1977; Mitchell, 1986; DeLuca, 1999)? Is consciousness fundamentally an aesthetic process, suggesting all experience and forms of reality are constituted through media (Welsch, 1997)? Are we in error to assume that the images and thoughts existing within the subjective internal landscape of the mind are somehow our own? Or, how could they be anything otherwise? Can contemporary art combining theoretical discourse with practical encounters open up spaces for the development of such an aestheticized culture (Bennett, 2012)? Can we develop conscious understandings of our subjectivities



within the space of social reconstruction, wherein art becomes a curriculum of what is possible and has yet to be?

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