

Chris Howlett: New Dawn

Boxcopy, Brisbane

24 August – 14 September 2013

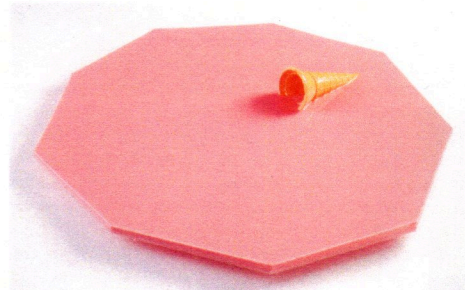
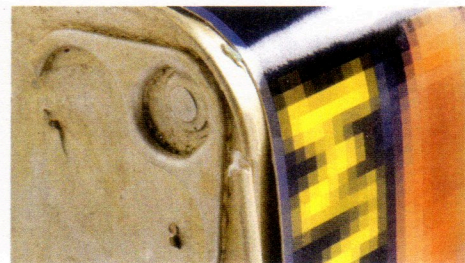
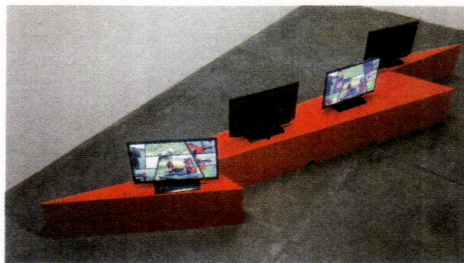
Metro Arts, Brisbane

11 – 28 September 2013

Increasingly today our expectation and definition of freedom is being muddled with our need for greater accessibility and functionality; our passwords are remembered by Google, our plane tickets stored by Apple, our photos owned by Facebook. As the operating systems we use to interface our interaction with the world update (so that as we have freer and unimpeded access) the more our personal data is owned by corporations and held within their sprawling, subterranean server farms, mockingly stylised as 'the cloud'.¹ Our actions are increasingly more distanced and remotely enacted by software—through 'signing' verbose terms and conditions and regular day-to-day usage, the user has generated a latent, complicit agreement surrounding the legality and pervasiveness of these practices.

For Brisbane-based artist Chris Howlett, society's immersed position within technology and virtual communities offers a unique opportunity to create art from new perspectives. Howlett's two new exhibitions share one name—New Dawn, inspired by the artist's channel surfing between two similar, but geographically distant, news stories. At Boxcopy, New Dawn features a looped four channel video work, presented on a custom-built, abstract lightning-bolt-shaped plinth. Scuttling between found news footage and in-game video, the mostly low resolution images float in a flat, moving grid. Cel shading is applied to give a graphic novel quality. Sources vary and mass content battles for primacy. The images are incredibly diverse; *Grand Theft Auto 4* modded characters of Homer Simpson, Mickey Mouse, a Stormtrooper and jihadist, run through a CGI version of Times Square; stills of Langley, the CIA's headquarters; Chelsea Manning; Edward Snowden as Where's Wally; a Guy Fawkes mask; an Old Spice deodorant ad; kids firing assault rifles; an Assassin's Creed 3 game jostling with user video of a home-made wrist blade; a flaming sword and gas masks; Satanist priests; a BBC news story on the Eurozone rescue plan; evangelical fits; robotic prosthetic limbs; Voyager 1 passing Saturn; a zoom out of the components of a motherboard, mixed with a zoom out from deep space; people throwing themselves out the windows of a flaming World Trade Center. The soundtrack compiles what sounds like multiple YouTube reaction videos—responses from users recorded via their webcams and uploaded for comment. From New Dawn's heady plurality we struggle to gather any narrative or logic. Despite the sheer mass of everything we have seen, the weight of the information is so light that it is borne by a few writable DVDs. Beneath the Ferrari red-coloured plinth something living has been crushed to death, comic book yellow liquid oozes on to the gallery floor.

At Metro Arts, New Dawn takes on a different character. Carrying over the same plinths, hundreds of minutely detailed objects float above the gallery floor, including rotting junk food, mobile phones, severed limbs, cigarettes, calculators and a low res, 'poor image' of a Nesquik cereal box. An ice cream cone is half submerged in a hexagonal canvas painted Neapolitan pink. The objects themselves are a mix of handmade and 3D printed. The facsimiles connect with Howlett's sculptural practice—with some handmade copies cast from their real world counterparts and others shaped purely from the artist's imagi-



clockwise from top left: Christopher Howlett. *New Dawn*. 2013. Detail, installation view, Boxcopy. Image courtesy the artist and Boxcopy; *Actor 5 (Spam)*. 2013. Detail. Digital print, polyurethane, lacquer and epoxy resin, ed. 1 of 10; *Actor 1 (Ice cream Coles Polygon)*. 2013. Polyurethane, lacquer and epoxy resin, ed. 2 of 3; *New Dawn (install floor detail)*; McDonalds cheeseburgers, Subway cookies, Froot Loops, Heinz Beanz, severed fingers, etc.). 2013. Polyurethane, digital prints, lacquer, enamel and epoxy resin; *New Dawn (Burger)*. 2013. Detail. Images courtesy the artist and Metro Arts, Brisbane.

nation. Differentiation is difficult. Digital mediation for Howlett inevitably means obfuscation. A recent article in *Pitchfork* nicely crystallises this argument. With the recent 'revival' of vinyl record culture, we appear to be re-embracing the 'more real' quality of the past, that 'tactile crackle' that we associate with authenticity. In actuality, often we are unaware these vinyl records are remastered from the digital file.² The lesson here is an old one (and one much more ably handled by Jean Baudrillard)—that any return to an 'authentic' experience is utopian and unrealistic. Our experiences are inscrutably etched into the surface of our being and cannot be shaken off.

Both the Boxcopy and Metro Arts components of New Dawn grapple with the multiple perspectives and views that we as users have of the world around us. As Hito Steyerl argues in her 2011 essay *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment in Vertical Perspective*, our vision of the world is no longer linear, out towards the horizon.³ Instead, we look down from above in 'God's eye view'. Drones in the air currently target insurgents using infrared cameras from a height of 10,000 feet.⁴ DARPA, the US Department of Defence's secretive research arm, is currently deploying the 'Gorgon Stare', camera equipment mounted on a single drone that can capture a super resolution video of an entire city, the footage's definition so complex that it requires processing by 2,000 intelligence analysts.⁵ In Howlett's Boxcopy exhibition, the eye of the satellite zooms and pans effortlessly, as if strutting. Our capabilities to understand

the world are significantly outstripped by our technology's ability to record it. As Howlett (and Steyerl) notes, high resolution increasingly also brings with it a social status.⁶ Near the end of the film, a purple skinned, muscular man blindly falls down a cliff face in constant motion, the action presented realistically thanks to physics engines that ensure a body hitting stone in reality is properly equated in the virtual world.

Despite the pessimistic tone, Howlett remains optimistic that technology can still provide opportunities for resistance. In the accompanying interview with Mathias Jansson, Howlett places his hope in the modding community and sketches out a speculative online space that 'actively promotes creativity, debate, self-expression and a truly democratic approach to sharing personally relevant information'.⁷ Steyerl also fights back, riling up against presumptions that 'poor images', the fluid, low res, everyday files the majority of the world handle (and which are utilised in New Dawn), are somehow less valuable. Rather, they are

no longer about the real thing—the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.⁸

Increasingly our hopes for privacy lie in the 'deep web', the unpoliced, unsearchable underbelly of the internet. Unfortunately, today, to seek out anonymity implies a need to hide, engendering presumptions of guilt. A primary tool in building an alternative model is Tor, an 'anonymity network' originally conceived by the US Navy to protect government communications, but co-opted in the last decade by the digital rights movement.⁹ Press surrounding it has encouraged a negative image—the service is often generalised by the media as being a haven for child pornography. Though the nature of the technology means user numbers and activity cannot be known or recorded, the press has also declared that around a third of Tor users in the United Kingdom are committing criminal offences.¹⁰ Despite these implications, the solutions today to the world Chris Howlett's *New Dawn* elucidates remain consistent—on the underground.¹¹

Jim Walsh

Christian Jankowski: Heavy-weight History
Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle,
Warsaw
June – 25 August 2013

Christian Jankowski's retrospective at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle spans twenty years of the German artist's most successful videos, performances and participatory experiments. The expansive survey includes sixteen of Jankowski's most notable works and consumes most of the Centre's second floor. The comprehensive nature of this survey enables its audience to witness the thematic development of the concepts to which Jankowski has devoted himself since the early '90s. The evolution of his practice has been elucidated through the curatorial direction of Ewa Gorzdek, who resisted a chronological ordering of the artist's work in favour of establishing thematic links between his projects.

Jankowski has used this survey to debut a new work, which also serves as the exhibition's title, *Heavy-weight History* (2013)—a pre-recorded video of a sports competition invented by the artist and complemented by a series of striking photographs taken throughout this pseudo-competition. In the video, a group of Polish heavy-weight lifters attempt to lift a number of Warsaw's historic monuments, accompanied by professional sports commentary, as the athletes lift several popular statues from around the city, but fail to lift others whose histories are deemed 'too heavy' to move. The work asks how we are to digest history and collective identity within a system of globalised capitalism, and what role mass media plays in influencing our consumption of events.

Other works worthy of mention include *The China Painters* (2007–2008), an extensive series of paintings commissioned by Jankowski and executed by artist laborers from the Chinese city of Dafen, from where the vast majority of forgeries of the Old Masters originate. Jankowski asked the workers to paint a canvas depicting the interior of a partially constructed art gallery, and to insert into this scene paintings they would personally like to see on its walls. *The Finest Art on Water* (2011–2012) is a video documentation of a collaboration between Jankowski and the luxury yacht brand Ferretti Group for the Venice Biennale of 2011. Together they designed a yacht, complete with sales video, to be sold to a buyer as a functioning art object. It combines the best of Venetian luxury with the cultural status contemporary art endows

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, 'Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, and Julian Assange: Our new heroes', *The Guardian*, accessed online <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/03/snowden-manning-assange-new-heroes>
2. Mark Richardson, 'Does Vinyl Really Sound Better?', *Pitchfork*, accessed online <http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/29-vinyl-records-and-digital-audio/>
3. Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment On Vertical Perspective', *e-flux*, accessed online http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/#_ftn13
4. Medea Benjamin, *Drone Warfare: Killing By Remote Control*, Verso, London, 2012, p.21.
5. Ibid
6. Mathias Jansson and Chris Howlett, 'New Dawn: Interview', accessed online <http://www.gamescenes.org/2013/09/an-interview-with-chris-howlett-mathias-jansson-during-the-last-decade-we-can-see-a-closer-connection-between-war-vid.html>
7. Ibid
8. Hito Steyerl, op cit.

9. Charlotte Philby, 'The Tor System: Welcome to the dark internet where you can search in secret', *The Independent*, accessed online <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/online/the-tor-system-welcome-to-the-dark-internet-where-you-can-search-in-secret-8651364.html>
10. Ibid.
11. Bruce Schneier, 'NSA surveillance: A guide to staying secure', *The Guardian*, accessed online <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/05/nsa-how-to-remain-secure-surveillance>



Christian Jankowski, *Heavy-weight History*. 2013. Print on barite paper. Photograph Szymon Rogiński.

upon its owner. Jankowski's popular video from the 2011 Sydney Biennale, *The Will of the Curator*, is also included. It takes the viewer through the behind-the-scenes processes of the artist exhibiting in a major international Biennale. Each segment of the video involves reportage from local media sources which explains to the viewer the trials and tribulations Jankowski encounters whilst pitching his proposal for the Biennale.

The conceptual underpinning of Jankowski's projects has always had a shifting focus on the relationship between the artist and the free market. He reveals the (often contradictory) nature of this relationship by colliding the art world and 'real' world in ironic, bizarre, but incredibly clever experiments. Each new work contains its own unique perspective on the transgressions that are inherent within the creation and exhibition of the art object. Jankowski

consciously plays the role of 'The Artist' within each of his works. The collaborations in which he engages, almost always with individuals outside the art industry, navigate consumption, demand, and speculation within the art world in a way that completely exposes his end 'product' as just another cog within the industry machine. This de-elevation of the art object argues against the artist's complicity within the exploitative machine of the art world and imbues Jankowski's works with a sense of self-awareness and neurotic honesty. When this reflexivity is coupled with his absurd sense of humour, it draws the viewer into the spirit of his projects wholeheartedly and makes the darker and dryer seeds of truth within his content easier to digest. *Heavy-weight History* was a very strong survey exhibition featuring new work from an artist for our time.

Carmen Ansaldo