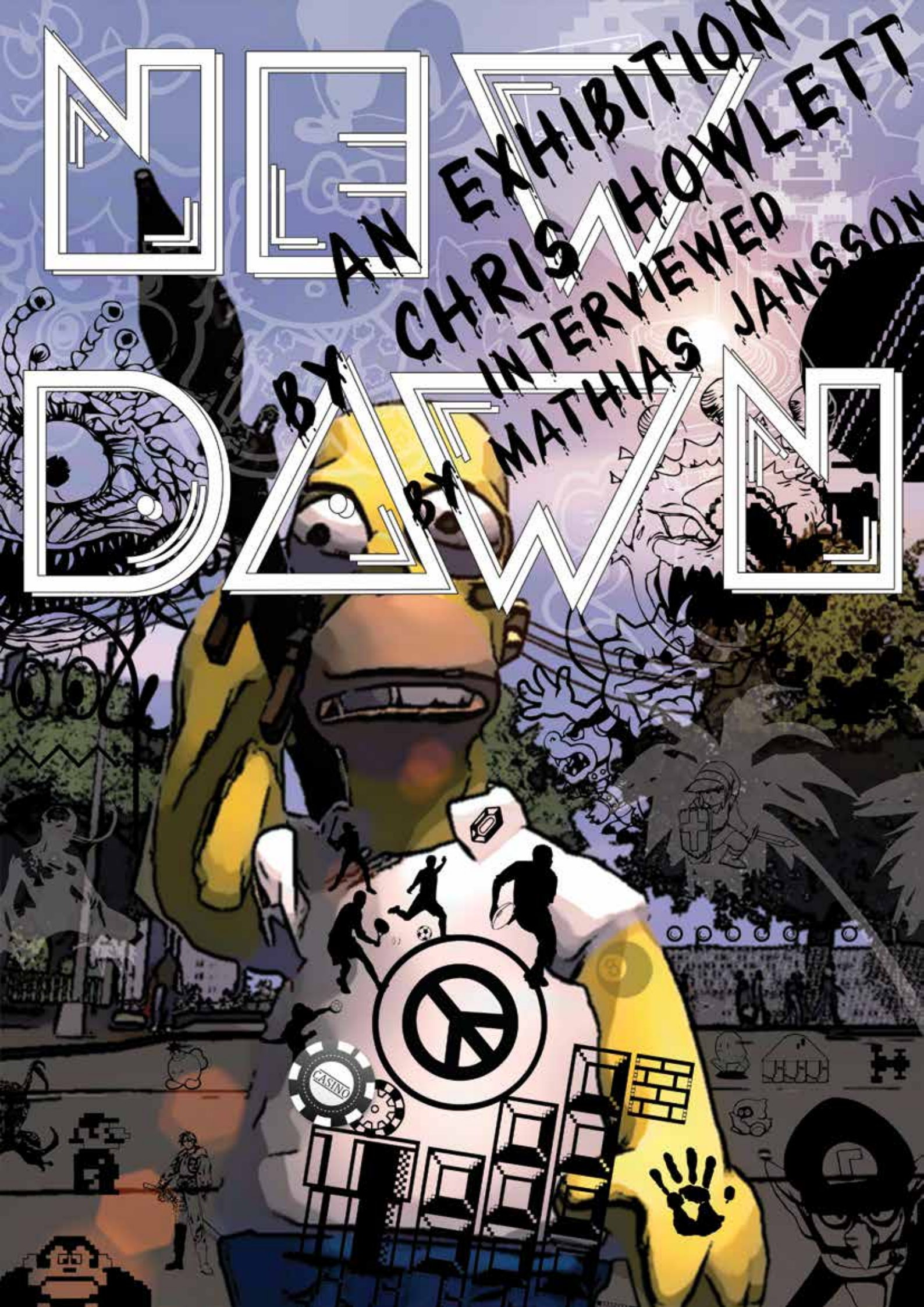


NOE

EXHIBITION
BY CHRIS HOWLETT
INTERVIEWED
BY MATHIAS JANSSON



NEW DAWN

an exhibition by Chris Howlett interviewed by Mathias Jansson

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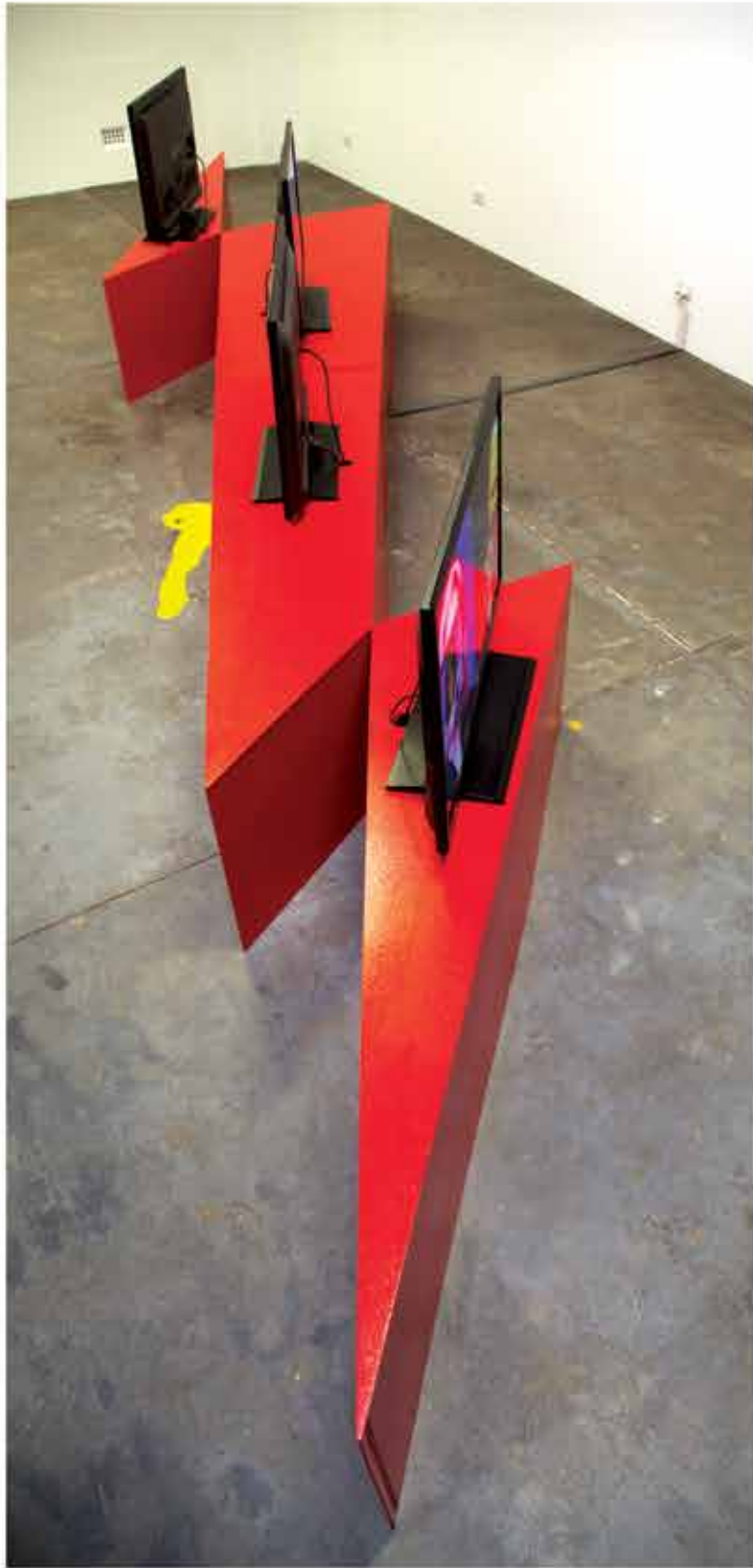
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CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Variant 1 (Flash Gordon Logo), 4 Channel - video Still (Homer, Mickey, Terrorist and Stormtrooper walking with various weapons), PAL, HDTV, 16:9, Stereo, 37 mins



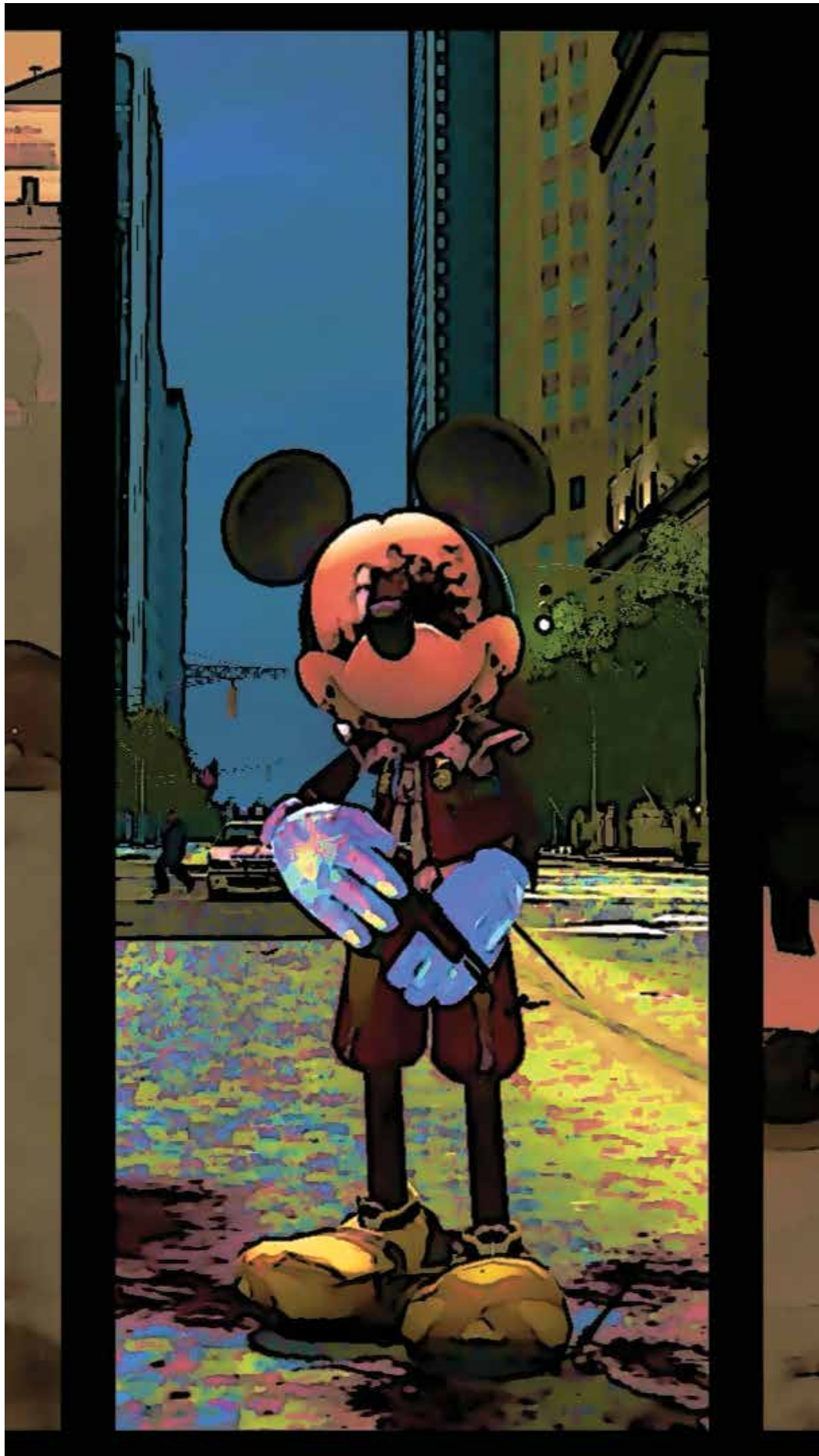
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CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Variant 2, 4 Channel - video Still (Homer, Mickey, Terrorist and Stormtrooper walking with various weapons), PAL, HDTV, 16:9, Stereo, 37 mins



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Variant 1, 4 Channel - video Still (Homer, Mickey, Terrorist and Stormtrooper walking with various weapons), PAL, HDTV, 16:9, Stereo, 37 mins



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Variant 1, 4 Channel - video Still (Homer, Mickey, Terrorist and Stormtrooper walking with various weapons), PAL, HDTV, 16:9, Stereo, 37 mins



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Variant 2, 4 Channel - video Still (Homer, Mickey, Terrorist and Stormtrooper walking with various weapons), PAL, HDTV, 16:9, Stereo, 37 mins



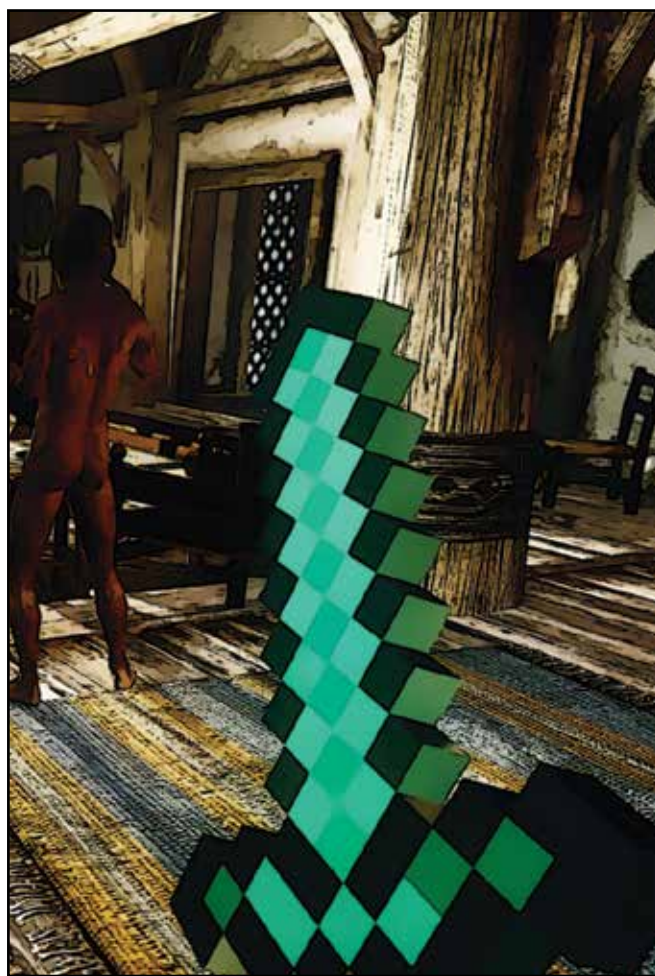
An Interview with Chris Howlett

Mathias Jansson

During the last decade we can see a closer connection between war, video games, art and political activism. The term “joystick war” is used to describe a new kind of warfare. Soldiers far away from war zones sit in safe office environments in front of monitors and continually steer drone flights with a joystick with which they can spy on or destroy the enemy. These virtual wars have previously been questioned by several artists such as Joseph Delappe, Harun Farocki and Wafaa Bilal. In many cases, these artists have combined footage from real wars with virtual wars (as video games) to question the borders between real and virtual warfare.

Chris Howlett follows this tradition in his new exhibition “New Dawn” when he remixes videos from computer games with online content from news channels and other sources. Howlett examines a changing world where virtual and real life are increasingly entangled and blurred. What will happen to our understanding and experience of violence, death, love and friendship when the borders between real and virtual are no longer discernable?

MATHIAS JANSSON art critic and poet based in Sweden, writes on game art and contemporary art



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Variant 2, 4 Channel
- video Still, PAL, HDTV, 16:9, Stereo, 37 mins

Jansson: Let's start with the title of your exhibition "New dawn". How did you come up with the idea?

Howlett: Initially, the title for the show came from two different news stories that surreptitiously came one after the other as I was channel changing on television. The first channel was a news story about a U.S. military operation in Afghanistan called New Dawn and as I switched to the next channel a news story cut to images of violence in Greece where a far-right neo-fascist party called Golden Dawn was gaining popular support. Both stories and the way each group carefully constructed the narratives around themselves in their interviews stuck in my mind. I thought by borrowing one of their names, I would be able to construct a frame for the new body of work which would conjure up many different associations about

Chris Howlett

the near future and the possible repercussions new technology would have on the body. Earlier that same day, my local video store closed down and out the front on their illuminated sign they had arranged and left behind the final block lettering notice in place to read, "THE INTERNET KILLED THE VIDEO STORE". As I looked into the empty store I thought to myself, what else will the internet kill off?

Jansson: As you say we live in some sort of breaking point where soon we will live more of our life in the virtual world, on the net, than in the real world. But technology has always had dualistic tendencies; it can be both good and bad. So what kind of new dawn are you seeing in front of you? Is it a utopian or dystopian future?

Howlett: Generally I don't have a pessimistic outlook as I look toward the future, but sometimes it's very hard not to be cynical about the way online global trends such as downloading films or the popularity of Facebook can lead to the demise of one institution and the rise of another such as the development of powerful surveillance and data mining programs like PRISM, ESCHOLON or Magic Lantern. If we didn't all swarm or mall around Facebook, Tumblr, Google or YouTube turning them it into the primary social networking and search engine platforms, would the development of PRISM have been possible? I don't think this is such a great leap to make.

I believe that it is necessary to have a presence online, but at what cost do these new technologies pose to civil liberties. Our own personal bytes of information can be sold, traded or stored for economic gain by a third party whose intentions are not of our own making, but can be closely aligned with profit or mysteriously fall under the guise of secretly protecting us from terrorists.

The troubling argument being made to us by our politicians and corporate media is that we need to lose some of our rights in order for the

Chris Howlett

State to keep us safe from those wishing us harm.

But how many freedoms do we give up in order to remain free or democratic? Is it as simple as deleting your Facebook account? Well no its not because just by deleting your Facebook account you're not deleting all of your information since its stored on servers - your comments and messages to friends will be left intact, and they want to hold onto that information for as long as possible - if not indefinitely, like most banks. Presently, there are over six hundred million users on Facebook. In the third quarter for 2013, they're worth around \$40 Billion which has been greatly undervalued by its original owners who previously estimated it at 141 Billion, but what about our cut? Didn't we also work for the company by uploading all of our personal and creative data for them to sell off and enable them to boast about how they built the largest database the world has ever 'seen'? Oh I forgot, it's free.

Jansson: The exhibition "New Dawn" consists of a 4 channel machinima/video art installation. (Machinima is short for machine animated movies created in video games.) What made you start working with Machinima and videogames?

Howlett: To me, games have always been a powerful medium from an early age, since it's through play that we as individuals first start to make sense of reality and the ways in which we use these arbitrary rules within a 'magic circle' to expand our own sense of self and inter-personal relationships. I can remember when PC video games only came on floppy discs and their pixels were green. Now with the exponential rise of faster processing speeds and increased memory cache in personal computers, graphic cards and mobile platforms, as well as the game consoles wars of Sony and Microsoft beginning to usurp the function of the television in the home as the primary media platform, it has become unavoidable not to recognize games and their cross-platform medium types as powerful new forms of media to use within art making.

For me, Machinima became just another artistic process to learn and expand my skill set in developing another space to communicate my thoughts and ideas outside of traditional modes of video production. One of the main attractions of this medium is the ingenuity of players who make up this diverse, global community and the vast array of hacking software tools that are developed and freely disseminated via modding websites, chat-rooms, bulletin boards and forums across the net. As well, my interest in DIY hardware hacking and my visual tendencies towards appropriation and remixing strategies in art-making lends itself quite easily to immersing myself within these communities.

Jansson: The 4 channel machinima/video art piece you are working on uses different themes such as violence, death, euphoria and identity whilst mixing virtual and real images from video games and the web. The borders between what is real and what is virtual seem to be a key to your work? Why are these borders so fascinating?

Howlett: Today I think the borders between what is real or virtual has become quite uncertain. We are currently in the stages of renegotiating what this means, especially when considering the effects these spaces of co-habitation have on social and political change. For instance, watching someone dying on the ground shot by a sniper in the current Syrian Civil War via Youtube then suddenly clicking over to young boys and middle age men making Halo, Assassin Creed or Dead Island weaponry in their own garage, begs the question;

How much do virtual events such as playing FPS (first person shooter) games influence or shape an individual's actions in the real world?

This way of reasoning is still relevant only if you still make the distinction between one reality as Actual versus the other version of reality as Virtual, rather than the position to which I ascribe, that they are the one and the same,



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Variant 1, 4 Channel - video Still, PAL, HDTV, 16:9, Stereo, 37 mins

which I ascribe to.

The important point to make is that reality has always been virtual. I don't think that this side-steps or contradicts the question since it is the very ambivalences and ambiguities which shape the terrain the work tries to take a position on—whether that happens successfully or not is still under-determined. As both a philosophical and ontological problem it is quite complex - there is a beautiful notion that Deleuze put forward when talking about his paradoxical theory on 'transcendental empiricism' in that our perceived reality is not only conceived of empirical evidence but also of apriori observations that constitutes an understanding of consciousness which operates both beneath language and beyond it which he characterized as 'transcendental'; it is the infinite potential field of virtualities out of which reality is actualized', he said, which EXPANDS consciousness and the ways

in which we can understand the Self existing in a state of becoming.

If we can agree that video games or virtual space is an extension of reality and most of us already agree upon, then trying to neatly package up their differences seems obsolete.

What makes me uncomfortable are the illusionary edges that exist between them, the conflicts that arise when we use reason and logic to discern their concrete existence and the slippages that occur with our understanding of perception as we try to unravel the political dimension behind this phenomenon.

It is these shifts in my perspective and the viewer's perspective I'm after, since these shifts in consciousness can lead to new forms of under-

standing being developed through Art. If I can be concise in trying to sum up my answer to the question it would be - there are no borders to cross, only space for us to inhabit.

Jansson: In your works you are using and remixing the never ending stream of news and user generated content published on internet and social media. Do you see the artist in the future as a person remixing our visual culture instead of creating new unique visual images?

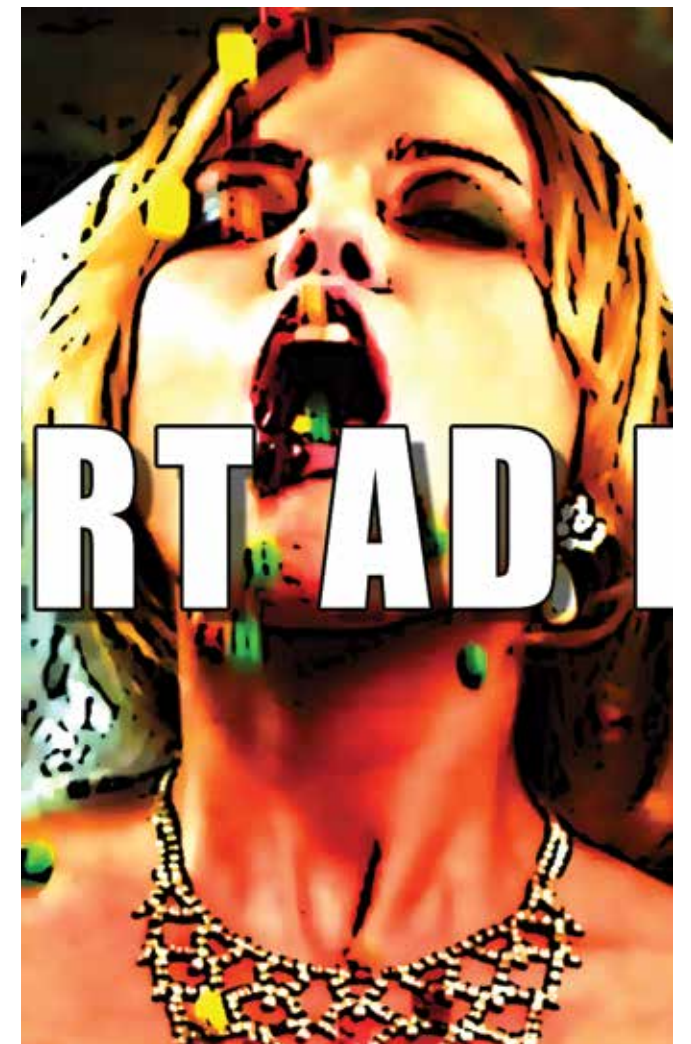
Howlett: Appropriation, remixing, mashups, quoting and collage are some of the strategies that artists have been using for some time now and all share some form of connection to one another, but as an artist it's not just a matter of the tools you use and the medium in which you deliver the content in, but how the message within the medium resonates; how representation and your intent underpinning it functions, rather than simply re-presenting technology or popular subculture trends back to the viewer as a mirror of themselves. The message is the medium was once a powerful new way to understand media and material which artists took up in the 50's and 60's, but it's less important now.

For me it is simply a means to an end, a way to understand the underlying meaning behind the artwork in question. That's why remixing or repurposing [appropriating] pre-existing material is such a seductive strategy since you can take a corporatized message and short circuit it or remap another kind of history, whether it be personal or invented, over the top of its original intended message.

There is also a certain level of satisfaction or thrill you get in taking it over or cannibalizing images for your own control. It takes the "less" out of "powerless". You also realize how fragile every symbolic system or model is once you routinely process this way.

A strategy like remixing also has a dual and paradoxical relationship within culture since

remixing in commercial music is officially accepted while in other areas it can be interpreted as violating copyright law or even stealing. This can also be the case with Machinima where on the one hand you have game developers and the companies who financially support them, providing the software tools to create videos in-game, but who don't foresee the communities' wide ranging abilities to develop software to subvert their source code in the form of modding tools and then provide these same tools back to the communities who will use them on a mass scale. There seems to be arbitrary limits placed on gaming depending how much access game companies and corporations want to give over to those wishing to play, since they already know what's potentially in store for them. So on the one hand it seems subversive, but on another it's widely accepted and even promoted, depending on what "open" system companies want to original set up.



As for the future, it's hard to tell what comes after remixing or whether there will be a backlash against it and a return to traditional handmade imagery to circumvent the banality of much remixed art, but it will always have a presence in artmaking.

Jansson: Many of your previous Machinima works have been working with popular culture and net culture. Many people would say it's a shallow culture, it's only surface. How do you as an artist find new meaning, depth and serious context in these images? What can we learn from popular culture?

Howlett: Personally, I believe it's quite difficult to make a judgment on popular culture in its entirety with regards to its shallowness or its superficiality. I'm trying to look at it in relation to a multiplicity of voices, opinions, effects, subjectivities, events and trends to uncover some form of dissensual engagement with ideology that can be understood on a poetic level. And when you start to look at it from this perspective it becomes less superficial. For instance, the trend first popularized on YouTube called Prancing with over six million views, where participants 'Prancerise' to music as they exercise as if they were a prancing horse seems on the surface to be superficial and even about self-mockery. But when you trawl back to find the woman who invented it and how she first used video to promote this style of exercise, it becomes very hard not to be caught up in the pathos for her beliefs on happiness and her unique communication style involving fashion, horses, enchantment, music selection and voice delivery.



Everything else that comes after it whether it be a parody or exercise fad seems pale in comparison, yet what it shows is that through her sincerity and unself-conscious way of talking to the video camera, she directly connected to users online who then went on to embody part of what she set out to do which was to have fun while exercising and at the same time push her own political message to do with happiness. This notoriety online then found its way into the main stream media where she was invited onto television talk shows and news programs.

Does it trivialize her political message on happiness to be seen in these multiple contexts, or does it gain traction and lift it away from being reduced to superficiality?

I don't think her message subscribes to the idea that just because our user-generated content follows templates set up by the professional entertainment industry that our identities and imagination become negatively colonized by this same commercial media - if anything, it is a dissensual arrangement that is in place that exists between

users, their uploaded content and the software templates designed by corporate interests. What we learn from popular culture and people like Joanna Rohrbach is how to be real in this virtual landscape of hate, fear and civil unrest and be brave and fearless to communicate our ideas on dance, film-making, fashion or even art.

Chris Howlett

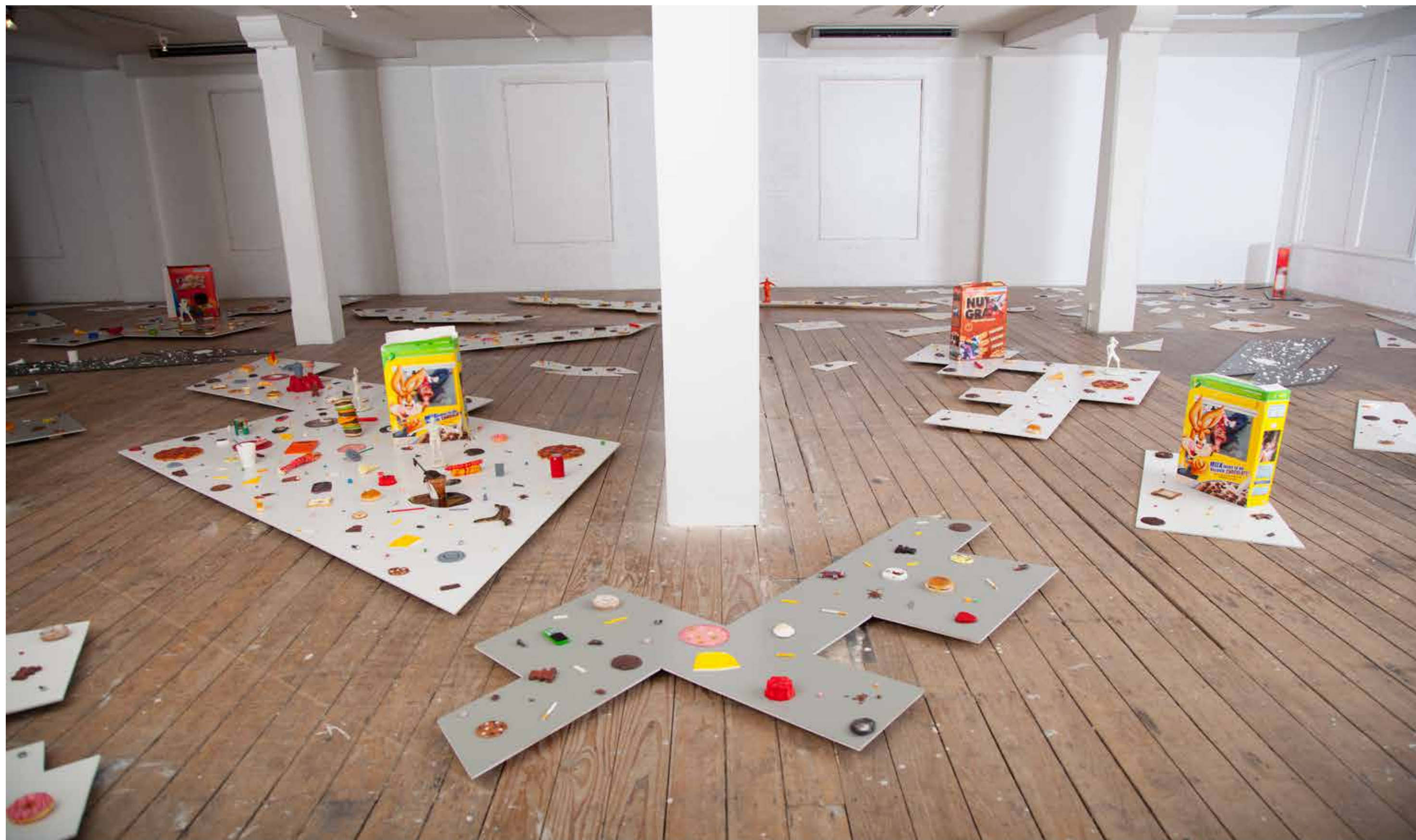
Chris Howlett

Continued ...

Mathias Jansson

Art is a statement. Not necessarily with a distinct political agenda but art always reflects on the contemporary. When the Spanish painter Francisco Goya (1746–1828) created the series “The Disasters of War” it was a way to describe and protest against the horror that affected the civilians during the Spanish civil war. Andy Warhol the inventor of Pop Art made paintings and prints that put questions about mass consumption and advertising into focus. Today we can again see a greater awareness for political and social questions among artists. Probably a reaction against the turbulent world we live in with wars, climate threats and financial crises.

The International Occupy Movement against social and economic inequality in the world is also a result of a bigger public awareness about these issues. In Europe both the Berlin Biennial (2013) and the famous Documenta (2012) exhibition in Kassel all accentuated the complicated relationships between political, social and economic issues within their curated artworks. I want to claim that artists are some kind of Superheroes that will save our worlds from catastrophes and injustice. But artists of today have the ability to catch trends in contemporary social space, reflect and visualize these questions in a broader and deeper cultural context to the audience. Artists today often take the roll of an important complement to news and political movement to give us new perspective on contemporary issues.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, !Metro Arts install detail, polyurethane, digital photographic prints, lacquer, epoxy resin on MDF mincrafted plywood clouds - dimensions variable.



CHRIS HOWLETT, *NEW DAWN*, 2013, *Actor 1 (Icecream Coles Polygon)*, Edition 1 of 3, 2AP, polyurethane, lacquer and epoxy resin, 75 x 500 x 500mm.

Jansson: Do you see yourself as a political artist?

Howlett: Assuming the role of a political artist and characterizing oneself in this fashion is a very difficult mantle to adopt, sometimes this is what the public, your peers or even the media maps onto you and your Art. On some level, I think it's quite a personal decision an artist makes to describe themselves in this way. I don't believe that Art is a form of political activism, because of its deep seated roots in European Aesthetics, Philosophy, and Art History.

In other instances, it's Art's refusal to bend to any pre-described function or static role in society that convinces me that it is the only political space left to inhabit - politics just can't deal with the majority of ideas that artists try and materialize. That is not to say that politics or the Political do not play a role in art making and an artist's intention for the ideas behind their work, but sometimes we can make too much out of Art or an artist's work and not enough out of actual events on the ground, that often have nothing to do with Art.

Creating an art work opposing the war in Syria is not going to stop the war in Syria, if that was the intention, but it can create interstices between you and a viewer which can produce a symbolic exchange that can shift a person's perspective on a contentious point of view. But is that really a political act?

I think there is a tension created out of some kind of relationship between Art and the Social which can give rise to feelings of emancipation or enlightenment. However, Art can also serve the opposite, where it becomes about oppression, manipulation and control. These relationships and contradictory effects are complicated further by artwork labels which assign one artist as Political over another who is not. This becomes redundant, since we're all trapped within the Social of which the Political is part – we just operate

in different circles from one another that intersect at given points.

Everything is Political and nothing is, it's irrelevant. For me, it comes back to the artist's intention for their work and how the objects, formalism or ideas create discourse or try to self-consciously resist it. This type of reasoning also raises many paradoxical and contradictory emotions in me since I'm still not sure what Art is for? This is what attracts me to it and the fact that most people don't really know what it is either.

When I was in graduate school, if Art was not critical it was not Art. This was quite a narrow position to put forward, but at least it was a position I could react against which both frustrated me and gave me license to try and construct meaning around my ambivalent feelings towards the role of the artist and what it means to devote one's life to this pursuit. I'm still trying to understand these different models of Art and how they've given me a space to test out my theories while also allowing me to develop a sense of identity through the knowledge that I and others have developed around my practice.

War is just one phenomenon that interests me within popular culture It's just as important as love, cheeseburgers or bubble-gum, which are all simply another form of material to use in order to create situations that may make possible new forms of social bonds to develop between my work and those who become a part of it.

I don't think that is too much to ask for.

Jansson: In the exhibition you have been working with both traditional hand-made objects but also used 3D-printed models. In many of your work you are mixing objects from the virtual and the real world, so that the borders between the virtual space and the real room are erased. In the exhibition it looks like the room has been flooded with objects from these two worlds and mixed to-

Chris Howlett

gether. How do you see the issues of copy, (pirate-copy), original, real and virtual object working together?

Howlett: The facsimiles that arise out of my sculptural practice cross over and blend many different forms of realities, each with their own sense of formalism. Some of the objects are cast directly from the real world while others are not and either come directly printed from a virtual space or are sculpted out of my imagination; some have matching in-game textures applied to their surfaces while others are directly using the natural object in the studio as a colour guide. Within the body of works there is also a colour called *Natural Grey* applied to various objects to represent the early design processes behind the manipulated forms within a 3D world which could also cross over into our real space, yet they are cast from objects tied to the everyday.

The objects' skins (game terminology for textures applied to objects referred to as "Actors") are either airbrushed, or their colour is mixed in to them during their liquid state before they cure. Some are dipped directly into paint, while others are hand brushed onto their surfaces. A number of objects either have a highly detailed lacquered and fetishistic surface while others have a slightly out of focus, low-res feel to the way they were airbrushed. This out-of-focus effect is meant to denote how game engines need low-res polygons and texture maps to maintain the real speed and frames per second rates.

Otherwise the gaming experience starts to lag and the reality becomes less immersive and therefore less real. It's interesting now how speed and time are translated through how much money you're able or willing to pay out for a fast CPU and graphic card; how fast you're able to play a game is directly linked to your socio-economic position, age and class. I guess this is just another small example of what Virilio meant by 'accelerated modernity'; how time and space are gradually shrinking and speeding up on us and what this could mean for our possible futures.

Chris Howlett



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Detail, (Starbucks Marcell Duchamp Takeaway), polyurethane and lacquer, 110 x 80 x 80mm.

Within the gallery there is also a flattening out of space and the way in which the design of objects in a game environment are created so as to have fewer surfaces, which are both designed and textured to deceive us about their true, under-developed structures. This was one of the reasons why a number of objects selected from our everyday environment were flattened out in the gallery space including a number of cans and containers that have been compressed into the bitumen by the speed and momentum of cars over an extended period of time. These were just objects I found lying on the roadside

such as Coke and Mother cans which appealed to my sense of empathy, but seemed to me to conflate both real and virtual environments simply from a design standpoint.

What interests me in using these sculptural processes of transmutation, self-assembly, multiplication, addition, repetition, subtraction and copying is for them to stand in metaphorically for those processes which are responsible as I see it for life to exist. They also seem fundamental to the new worlds and environments



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Detail, (Squashed Mother Can) polyurethane and lacquer, 75 x 280 x 150mm.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Detail, (Spam with label) polyurethane, digital prints and lacquer, 80 x 100 x 60mm.

currently created for our consciousness to exist online. None of these phenomena and processes in the work are overly new; additive manufacturing (3D printing) has been around since the eighties, but what is important is trying to understand how these new forms of co-habitation both online and offline are repositioning our understanding of our bodies and subjectivities caught up within these new terrains. And these objects provide an entry point for this discussion to take place on a phenomenological, philosophical and conceptual level.

Not everyone plays video games, but their physical lives are steadily encroached upon by online space where they have to make choices about how to represent a presence virtually and it is these forms of decision making that intrigues me.

Jansson: Some of the objects in the exhibition are collected or inspired from video games. You are also using avatars in the exhibition. In many of your moving-image works video games are the starting point for developing the subject-matter. Why did you start to work with video games?

Howlett: Computer games were just another entry point to start thinking about how I was going to translate my online and virtual experiences into a real sculptural space like a gallery environment. The online culture of gaming and the modding communities surrounding it attract me because of the free exchange of software hacking tools and models that can be freely downloaded and manipulated to your own ends. There is also a healthy level of critical debate that goes on as to how particular mods are rated and how relevant they are to what you are looking to utilize for your own purposes.

One of the main areas of contention for me was trying to get away from thinking of online and virtual space as one large, corporatized cell where your presence is continually surveilled and tracked, where one has to continually log in, or follow a pre-determined narrative where your personal data increasingly seems to corre-

spond to the advertising information flashing up at the side of the screen. These modding communities provide me with an alternative model to think about online space as one which is not entirely trapped within a corporatized model from where there is no escape from, but one which actively promotes creativity, active debate, self-expression and a truly democratic approach to sharing personally relevant information.

However, I'm also not only there to discover modding tools to enhance the reality behind my games and change their game rules and physics, but to also understand these sites on a pseudo-archeological and sociological level. I enjoy trawling through the Grand Theft Auto forum debates such as Why You Shouldn't Be Allowed To Mod Fascist Tattoos Onto Biker's Skins?, A Guide To Punctuation, Feminism, Atheists Arguments Against God, Is Lifelong Imprisonment inhumane?, Abortion?, and so on.

There's always a point where too much reality starts to corrupt the fantasy behind play, the user-generated representations shatter the function of the magic circle and a social realist agenda takes over.

A gun is no longer simply a gun, but has real consequences outside the game environment. I still want to consider these virtual environments as authentic spaces for meaningful activity where new forms of knowledge, forms of resistance and opportunities for dialogue between disparate ideas opens up and pushes human consciousness into new territories that ultimately, produce a profound and positive effect on our evolutionary development. But this optimism can be very short lived, especially when you have to confront your day-to-day experience which is indeed heavily impacted upon by large global corporations, plutocracies and oligarchies whose main purpose is the acquisition of wealth and co-opting authentic social experience to sell back to us as something we don't really need like, Coke.

Jansson: In art history we have Pop artists who historically used objects from commercial and popular culture in their art. Do you feel any relationship with Pop Art or to any theoretical ideas to come out of this movement?

Howlett: One of the defining moments in twentieth century art that heavily influenced Pop was Duchamp's radical shifting of the boundaries between high culture with mass culture through his Readymades. The mythology around this moment describes the way in which he put the message in the bottle around 1913 and it wasn't until his retrospective in 1963 at the Pasadena Art Museum now known as the Norton Simon Museum that the message finally arrived and people started to understand the profound implications behind the way that his works called into question the defining structures of art and the conditions of its production. You can see his influence on an artist like Andy Warhol, especially his Brillo Boxes and archival box works. Both Duchamp and Warhol are important to me and the legacies they left behind.

CHRIS HOWLETT based in Australia, contemporary artist

CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, (Starbucks Marcell Duchamp Takeaway), polyurethane, lacquer and epoxy resin.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Detail, (Two Graphite Pencils At Rest), polyurethane and lacquer, 15 x 175 x 135mm.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, *Detail (Dog in a Bun Upright)*, polyurethane, lacquer and epoxy resin.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, *Detail (McDonalds Takeaway Smoothie)*, polyurethane, lacquer and epoxy resin.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Detail, (No Logo Coke Can) polyurethane and lacquer, 125 x 60 x 60mm.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Detail, (McDonalds with Starbucks Straw) polyurethane and lacquer, 110 x 210 x 90mm.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, Actor 3 (Double Burger Tower), Edition 1 of 3, 2AP, polyurethane, lacquer and epoxy resin, 250 x 125 x 135mm.



CHRIS HOWLETT, NEW DAWN, 2013, (Hypothetical Floor Detail), polyurethane, digital photographic prints, lacquer and epoxy resin, dimensions variable.

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