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Weapons on the Wall, **2004-05.** Installation detail. Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Photography Richard Stringer.

CONFRONTING CONSENSUS:
THE ART AND POLITICS OF CHRISTOPHER HOWLETT
MARK PENNINGS AND MARK WEBB

The restless Chris Howlett uses his art in energetic pursuit of a wide range of conceptually and politically focused projects in divergent media. He is, in fact, an exemplary multi-tasker in a post-medium world, and has essayed everything from installation, to performance, to sound art, to digital modding with a Quixotic willingness to engage with big themes and issues that would daunt many artists.

His first major work *Hire Me Out* (1999–2000), was a conceptually immersed performance piece. In this work Howlett hired out his services to a number of teachers and students at CalArts, California, where at the time he was a Post-graduate student.

These included Sam Durant who employed his pupil to manufacture a crate to transport artwork to the Blum & Poe art gallery in Los Angeles; Martin Kersels whom Howlett helped to prepare a photo shoot for an exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum; and Jesse Proksa who hired the artist for a body massage.

These performances typified the art of 'service aesthetics', a movement that offered actions, such as counselling consultations, hairdressing, and cleaning services, to the public. Clients who received these services were not treated like anonymous, standardised mass consumer types. Instead, the services were done *gratis* so as to enable artists to transcend the commodity *diktat* that dominates our lives today. Their acts of generosity staked a claim for intimacy, integrity and respect, human emotions that are only of value to capitalism's instrumental ethos when required for business contacts, or in exchange for a fee.

Although Howlett's performances were also predicated on 'service', he was actually paid for his labour (probably strictly by the hour). Accordingly, it seemed that he was not so much attempting to transcend the capitalist *dasein* as draw attention to the way labour attracts a financial equivalent, an

left: **Weapons on the Wall**, **2004-05**. Installation details. Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Photography Richard Stringer. *right*: **Weapons on the Wall: Bart Simpson toy doll**, **2004-05**. Detail. Yellow acrylic on plastic. Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Photography Richard Stringer.

'abstract' fiduciary value. It is this symbolic, abstract value of *art* labour that lay at the heart of the artist's conceptualist proposition; to wit, that labour's value changes when it assumes an aesthetic dimension when performed in the art world. And further, that this arbitrary value is susceptible to the influences and pressures that operate in broader consumer culture. This may explain why he approached his teachers to help him fulfil his tasks, for as authority figures in a renowned art school they had a certain 'currency' that added value to Howlett's art performances or outputs. There was also an interesting reversal to this relationship, for the teachers paid for the student's labour rather than being paid for their pedagogical services. The work may have also owed something to CalArts teacher Michael Asher's brilliant conception of his own creativity as measured by the fees he charges according to concept, time and place. Asher sets a limit on the length of time his 'services' can be used, and so controls the value of his art labour while limiting the capacity of others to profit from his work: that is, usually collector re-sells at teratical profit, the artist gets zilch.

This examination of artistic labour demonstrated Howlett's early interest in the rationale of consumer capitalist society, and how artists negotiate this condition. Today's post-avant-garde can be characterised as having adopted a pragmatic attitude in this milieu—one that both accepts the decline of art's authority as well as its incorporation into a consumer society that especially values forms of 'creative labour' predicated on celebrity, entertainment and publicity. That being the case, the artist must adapt the notion of artistic value to a system that is heavily invested in mediating perceptions, and often encourages hysteria and other intense emotions so as to attract enough transient interest to secure a sale.

Howlett responded to this condition by creating a sprawling installation called *Weapons on the Wall* (2004–05) (Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane,

The Farm, Brisbane) that directly confronted consumer culture and the media sphere. *Weapons on the Wall* was the antithesis of *Hire Me Out*. If the latter contained strict parameters and a subtle conceptual elaboration of work relations, *Weapons* was an incredibly ambitious work that attempted to comprehend and capture the sublime abundance and excess of an economic system predicated on war, hysteria and wasteful consumption.

Weapons was meant to be a model or mirror of the global media sphere in an arrangement that presented a synchronic snapshot of contemporary life. Like any self-respecting photojournalist, however, Howlett's selection of his 'shot' clearly revealed his motives, and *Weapons* was a vehement and unashamedly political work. In a mix of appropriated and hand made images and sculptures, Howlett presented a discourse about a global condition in which fashion, comedy, and sport were interlarded with violence and war. Although these subjects offer competing and antagonistic agendas, Howlett facilitated their imbrication via a bounty of communication forms and media objects that shared the same rhetorical features: namely, sales pitches and propagandistic assertions.

Nicolas Bourriaud has described the existence of a 'precarious aesthetic' in contemporary art that exudes the overwhelming heterogeneity of the consumer era. Such art is characterised by,

> [S]aturation; the use of 'poor' materials; a failure to distinguish between scraps and objects of consumption, between edible and solid; and the rejection of any fixed compositional principle in favour of installations that seem nomadic and indeterminate.[1]

Bourriaud refers to the art of Thomas Hirschhorn and Jason Rhoades in relation to a precarious aesthetic, and the frenetic tone of Howlett's installation was certainly reminiscent of Hirschhorn's *Caveman* (2003), for it shared an ambitious scope and explicit political content. As in Hirschhorn's installations, Howlett's show forced the viewer to confront a veritable cornucopia of everyday detritus—from toilet paper packets to masks, from boxes of apples to children's clocks, from Australian flags and sports jackets, to Coca Cola bottles, mock bananas and pineapples. The artist also installed a group of moulded yellow sculptures representing various commodities such as petrol cans, axes, vacuum cleaners, tyres, and lamps, some of which rested in a supermarket trolley. This was supplemented by pin-ups, op shop paintings and prints, magazine covers, and advertising and merchandise posters that were hung on the walls and every other available space.

The show's title was gleaned from a description of World War II propaganda posters, and so the inference was clear: the media is not just about entertainment, but is also a primary vehicle for the

clockwise from top: *Hire Me Out: Expanded business card*, 1999/2000. Acrylic paint on wall. CalArts, California, Los Angeles; *Hire Me Out: VHS archive detail (nine VHS tapes)*, 1999/2000. NTSC, 720 x 576, approx. 10 hours. CalArts, California, Los Angeles; *Hire Me Out: Martin Kersels*, "Help with Kouros photo shoot", $/hr (n/a) 10 hrs $300.00, 1999/2000. Video still, duration 2:00:00:00, Tapes 1-2, 4 hrs actual footage. Materials: Martin Kersels, Michael Prior, fake Greek Kouros, crash pads and spring board. CalArts, California, Los Angeles; *Hire Me Out: Jacques De Beaufort*, "Paint him dying", $5.00/hr 1 hr $5.00, 1999/2000. Video still, duration 1:00:00:00, Tapes 1, 1 hr actual footage. Materials: Jacques De Beaufort, acrylic paint on plywood. CalArts, California, Los Angeles.
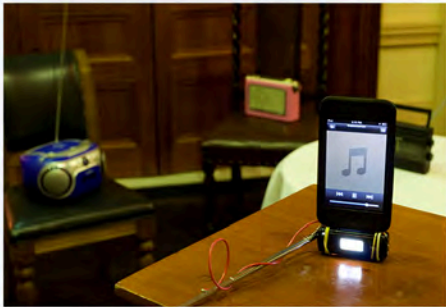
clockwise from top: *Frequencies*, **2009**. Installation detail. The Balmoral Room, City Hall, Brisbane. Photography Brock Yates; *Frequencies*, **2009**. Installation detail. The Balmoral Room, City Hall, Brisbane. Photography Brock Yates; *INOUT*, **2006**. Installation detail with office/studio door open (texting font "N" and "O"). Audio with graphite pencil on wall. Blindside Artist Run Space Inc., Melbourne; *Frequencies*, **2009**. Installation detail. The Balmoral Room, City Hall, Brisbane. Photography Brock Yates.

dissemination of consumerist ideology and other propagandistic endeavours. The magazine hoardings that adorned the walls showed dramatic images of Osama Ben Laden and Saddam Hussein, which also illustrated the politics of the media sphere in 2004–05. They were controversial figures during the invasion of Iraq in a war that proved to be quite divisive in many countries. The invasion provoked a raft of protesters who marched on the streets with handmade posters that proclaimed their views. Howlett included a sampling of these DIY posters with hand painted messages such as 'People R Dying Stop the War', 'War Fuels War', and 'Be Afraid. Your government depends on it'. The installation thus became the arena for a shouting match between contending forces; indeed, this incredibly cluttered and at times confusing exhibition mimicked the kinds of debate waged in mass media formats. Curator Chris Handran aptly described this scene,

> These seemingly radical juxtapositions point to a certain equivalence amongst these varying statements: whether protesting against war or waging it, spearheading an advertising campaign or a terrorist strike, reporting on world politics or on contemporary art, all seems to come down to sloganeering and spectacle.[2]

This ambivalent installation therefore offered a mediated menagerie where war and violence became forms of entertainment. Numerous monitors in the centre of the installation displayed footage covering a gamut of spectacles and entertainments, including the 9/11 attacks, American sit-coms, extremist websites, and Sesame Street's voracious Cookie Monster. There was also a Sony Playstation that ran an interactive game based on toy soldiers, and a Coltan5 axe-wielding barbarian scenario, which could be played using a helmet modelled on Papuan mud masks. By playing these games the viewer became implicated in the entertainment-as-war factor. The message of such activities announced an indivisibility between democratic freedoms, the commodity world, entertainments, and the kind of geopolitical sweetheart deals that support repressive dictatorships, weapons' industries, and other dubious enterprises that keep the whole shebang chugging along.

Howlett's installation also pondered questions about how to find truth in a world where whoever controls the media image selects the information by which we may know the nature of social reality. This simulational condition also generates an overwhelmed and fearful populace that is prone towards forms of hysteria, and this is of course the psychological tide upon which the masters of the tabloid media have built billion dollar empires. Howlett's view of this state of affairs was expressed with some vehemence, but he was also

pragmatic, as in keeping with the post-avant-garde acknowledgement that artists no longer possess special expertise or superior knowledge, nor do they have much power to influence public debate in the media sphere (unless, perhaps, one produces a diamond encrusted skull).

In 2006 Howlett moved to Melbourne where he produced *In/Out* at the Blindside Artist Run Space. This small installation consisted of video, sound and drawings. It was a sparse, even bare installation, which was in marked contrast to the bustling assault of *Weapons*. However, the scant letters that decorated the walls and the lone corner monitor were accompanied by an aural overload of blaring music that dramatically assailed the senses. This deployment of sound art was another means by which the artist could extend his preoccupation with the nature of contemporary social reality.

In the aural component of the installation a recording of the artist's and his sister's responses to word-association tests provided a tonal code based on the words 'in' and 'out', which were turned into a distorted soundtrack. *Weapons* focused on the power of advertising and other forms of propaganda that employ the 'psychological barrage' principle to influence people's thoughts. But *In/Out* approached the phenomenon from the 'inside', as word-association tests are used to expose the inner workings of consciousness. This relies on probing, mining and influencing the operations of interior life. In order to unearth this material from his and his sister's mind Howlett established a set of procedures to record their answers.

Step 1. Record all responses using a hand held mobile phone.
Step 2. Respond to the word with the first thing that comes into your mind.
Step 3. Respond to your responses using the word 'IN' to describe them tonally.
Step 4. Respond to your responses using the word 'OUT' to describe them tonally.

Some of his sister's responses were as follows: Black = Blue; Death = Aphid; Holes = Divot; Kind = Pink; Ticking = Bomb. The word association tests were also illustrated in a video. As noted, the recording of this process was slowed down and distorted and was used to accompany fragmented pictures of Howlett's body parts which spun at various speeds on the screen, announcing psychological and physical states of fragmentation. This work suggested that although we are the focus of psychological tests and other intrusive forms of measurement—that
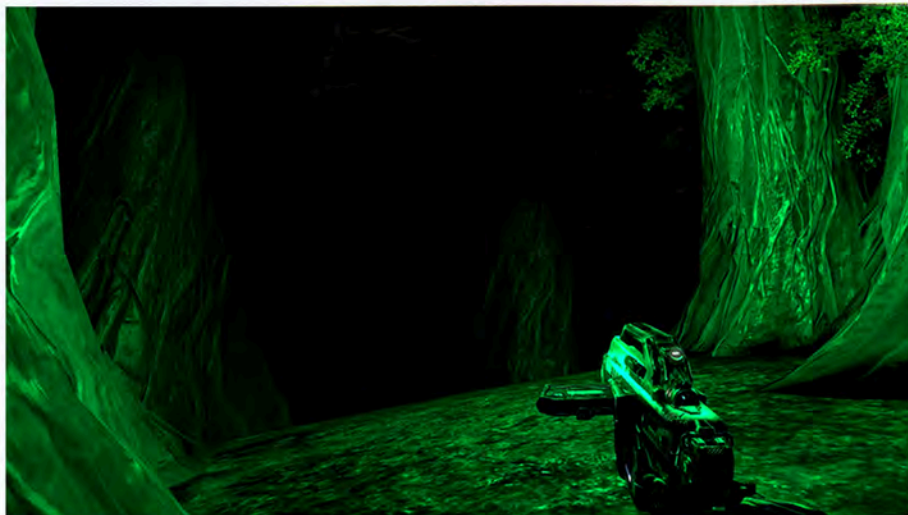
HOWLETT'S INSTALLATION ALSO PONDERED QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW TO FIND TRUTH IN A WORLD WHERE WHOEVER CONTROLS THE MEDIA IMAGE SELECTS THE INFORMATION BY WHICH WE MAY KNOW THE NATURE OF SOCIAL REALITY.

from top: **Bushstalkers, 2009**. Machinima video still, PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9; **Bushstalkers, 2009**. Installation detail. !Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photography Brock Yates.

are in turn transcribed into various communicative forms to represent and control us—there are aspects of human experience that are unaccountable and stubbornly refuse such managerial dictates.

On his return to Brisbane in 2008 Howlett produced *Christopher Howlett Enterprise: this is not art but design*. This was an on-line work that covered multiple areas including extending his interest in digital media, exploring aspects of Relational Aesthetics, and returning to his conceptual roots. The idea for this project emerged in 2006 when Howlett received government

clockwise from top: **Michael Jackson 4 Ways: Part IV – Machinima video still (Three Jacksons watching TV)**, **2009/10**. Single channel, PAL, HDTV 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 30 minutes; **Michael Jackson 4 Ways: Part IV – Machinima video still (Seven Jacksons locked in a room)**, **2009/10**. Single channel, PAL, HDTV 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 30 minutes; **Michael Jackson 4 Ways: Part IV – Machinima video still (Seven Jacksons locked in a room)**, **2009/10**. Single channel, PAL, HDTV 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 30 minutes; **Michael Jackson 4 Ways: Part IV – Machinima video still (Seven Jacksons locked in a room)**, **2009/10**. Single channel, PAL, HDTV 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 30 minutes.

have mostly accepted that this distance has all but evaporated. In keeping with this attitude, Howlett does not delude himself into thinking that his business offers a critical challenge to the status quo, but he does resort to an almost nostalgic deployment of the rhetorical, didactic and bombastic approach of some '60s conceptualists to address the residue of the art/business divide.

One facet of this concern involves confronting distinctions between art and design. In modernism, art was considered to be superior to design. In this schema the latter was a derivative affair that was sullied by its direct engagement with the marketplace. In contrast, artists could have their cake and eat it to, being both 'above' the market while selling work here and there. Such views seem anachronistic today, as there are no longer any easy distinctions between art and design, art and business, or art and entertainment. Howlett's response to this condition was articulated in the following equation:

$$DESIGN + ART = ART$$
$$DESIGN \neq ART$$
$$ART \neq DESIGN$$

This problematic sum evokes the style of avant-garde manifestoes, especially conceptual art's treatment of language in Joseph Kosuth's formula 'Art as Idea as Idea'. It also touches on George Maciunas's statements about art in the *Fluxus Manifesto*. In Maciunas's anarchic attack on art's value system, he made the 'relativity' claim in which an antidote to the artist's 'professional, parasitic and elite status in society' could be demonstrated by the belief 'that anything can be art and anyone can do it'.

Whereas Fluxus might have been accused of sly connoisseurship or an ersatz artistic revolution, Howlett, as always, is much more direct. He dispenses with subtlety by offering rather simple equations that contain both an assertion and a question. The question reveals much about the artist's thinking about this topic, for his essential enquiry is: in the normal scheme of things art is not design and design is not art, but if you put the two together somehow it becomes art. Why? The bluntness of such an inquiry makes it pointless to indulge in forms of sophistry that explain how these two can be compatible and incompatible at the same time, especially in an era of 'cultural industries'. Instead, the artist sincerely asks us to share in a logical dilemma and thus establishes an empathy with the viewer that, in some respects, makes a greater impact than a work like *Weapons on the Wall*.

Despite the artist's claims, his approach to *Christopher Howlett Enterprise* does not entirely conform to the 'social relations as art' mantra promulgated by Nicolas Bourriaud and his ilk. However, Howlett does recognise relational art's

assistance to open an interactive design studio called *Post Studio Arts.com*. As any self respecting artist will know, work is something one does to earn money to do art, but Howlett saw other points of convergence between his art and business, as he was, in effect, producing graphic design 'art work' for clients while building a company brand.

This project drew attention to some of the more intractable dilemmas facing the post-avant-garde as it sorts through older artistic legacies. One perennial conflict involves the avant-garde's relationship to mass culture. Once, the artist could claim autonomy from consumer capitalism, but today's artists

insecure place as an 'interstice', and this has a direct bearing on his art/design/business nexus. Bourriaud argued that the art world is implicated in a larger economic system, but that it operates in a 'social interstice' (a Marxist term referring to a trading community that can elude the capitalist economic context) and so is somewhat insulated from economic 'corruption'. This is enabled because artists working with relational aesthetics made art predicated on social relations rather than objects/commodities. Many of these relational-type projects include methods of production that are articulated through invitations, casting sessions, meetings, user-friendly areas, and appointments. These 'corporate' methods make claims about 'insulation' rather dubious, but according to Bourriaud, they still lie beyond charges of capitalist collusion because they offer an 'operative realism' that uses mimicry as a subversive strategy that reveals the actual nature of capitalist experience.

Howlett's design company produces goods and services like other design studios, but he wrestles with the task of determining how much his approach actually can exist in an interstice. Does his art offer succour to those who wish to maintain a critical attitude in a neo-liberal era, or is it just another business? Does his art/design nexus offer flexible resistance to the current order, or does it 'surrender to engineered consent and the pacifying distractions of enforced leisure'?[3] One can see that Howlett fears his art might not disrupt consumerist forces as much as materialise and reinforce them, but this admission reveals an honesty that lies at the core of the artist's practice, and in these confusing times he maintains a kind of integrity. In an age dominated by cynical reason this is no mean feat.

In *Flashbacks* (2009) Howlett continued to examine the way in which meaning is derived from a multiplicity of places, spaces, mediations and texts. This two-part installation was first exhibited at the Brisbane City Hall and then later at !Metro Arts, Brisbane. It comprised a series of screen-based and machinima works, including *The Long Con* with his video footage of an anti-war rally held in central Brisbane, a modified videogame *Bushstalkers*, and a series of 'modded' *Sims* works *Michael Jackson 4 ways: Parts 1, 2, 3 & 4,* and *Homesteads*. This was accompanied by an extensive sound installation of hardware hacked iPod transmitters, titled *Frequencies*. In these installations Howlett presented the viewer with contesting voices about highly politicised issues like the Iraq war and its bloody aftermath, the life and death of Michael Jackson, debates around art and censorship, and the confessional discourse of celebrity talk shows. These topics were used to encourage the viewer to consider the complexity of comprehending what is *real* in the enunciative field, and how this is related to the ideological compulsion to render *truths* from moral perspectives.

clockwise from top: **Homestead**, **2009**. Installation detail. PAL, 720 × 576, 16:9, Video projection and acrylic wall painting. !Metro Arts, Brisbane; **Homestead: Machinima video still (two babies with cockroaches)**, **2009**. PAL 720 × 576, 16:9; **The Long Con,** **2009/10**. 'Flashbacks', installation still, single channel, PAL, 720 × 576, 16:9, 16 minutes. !Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photography Brock Yates; **Homestead: Machinima video still (Burning woman)**, **2009**. PAL 720 × 576, 16:9.

HOWLETT'S PRACTICE HAS FOR SOME TIME INVESTIGATED THE SPACES BETWEEN ART AND DESIGN, ACTUAL AND VIRTUAL SITES AND POLITICAL AND AESTHETIC RHETORIC.

clockwise from top: **Homesteads – Part 2: Machinima video still (Kevin, Jessica and Nick Rudd)**, **2009**. PAL, 720 x 576, 16:9; **Homesteads – Part 2: Machinima video still (Jessica Rudd)**, **2009**. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9; **Homesteads – Part 2: Machinima video still (Kevin Rudd Premonition)**, **2009**. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9; **Homesteads – Part 2: Machinima video still (Kevin Rudd with Death)**, **2009**. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9; **Homesteads – Part 2: (Kevin Rudd)**, **2009**. Installation detail. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9. !Metro Arts, Brisbane. Photography Brock Yates.

Works like *Bushstalkers* were purposively redesigned to confound the expectations of the user, so that they might reconsider their own role in the narrative of the game. Howlett reconfigured, and thereby inverted, the essential operations of the first person shooter video game *Unreal Tournament 3*, with the effect of folding the real world back into the virtual and remapping the experience of violence and death. Indeed, the viewer cannot actually shoot the weapons because this essential function has been disabled. This left players with nothing else to do but aimlessly wander around a nocturnal forest landscape following a set of random lights. When one did step into the light, so to speak, another type of dysfunctional process was revealed: that of the perverse misrepresentations that make up the fog of real war. For in *Bushstalkers* Howlett remapped the fantasy of virtual death

to include the actual voices of Iraqi veterans who related tales of revenge, false confession and the right wing media spin that make up the competing narratives of the pro and anti-war movements in America.

In modified *Sims* works like *Michael Jackson 4 ways: Parts 1, 2, 3 & 4, Homesteads* and more recently *Metropolis*, Howlett makes us aware of how these simulated environments are becoming more pervasive. They are also increasingly being conflated with our 'real' lives, for *Sims*-based mods are predicated on 'a simulation whose logic is based on transparent omnivision'.[4]

In *Michael Jackson 4 ways: Parts 1, 2, 3 & 4* the artist reprogrammed the narratives of tightly controlled spaces to introduce us to the Jackson family, all of whom were Michael clones. That Michael Jackson came to a rather sad end is of no real surprise. Evolving from cherubic talent to anime pop princess, he was 'the musical genius' as a living deity, and eventually a martyr for the disenfranchised Afro-American. For some he was an apologist for childhood purity, true love and understanding, while others considered him an unrepentant pedophile. His excruciating and ongoing declarations of innocence while he continued to confound all the familial conventions of puritanical America eventually saw him banished from his own fantasy kingdom. This controversy is treated in audio tracks that accompanied Howlett's Jackson images. These conveyed the tragic-comedy of the extreme sides of the debate that made competing claims for truth in the hyper-real spaces of the *Sims* fantasy kingdom. Michael you will not be forgotten.

In the *Homesteads* series we are witness to the internment and eventual disintegration of *Sims* family units, while on audio tracks Dr Phil and Oprah roll out their familiar shtick of confession, humiliation and redemption in television land. In *Homestead I* and *II* the Rudd family—patriarch and (now ex) Prime Minister Kevin, wife Therese and their three children—are all trapped in their very own 'vector to pure transparency', which is part green house, labyrinth and isolation chamber. If ever there was an ideal avatar for being a *Sim* it would have to be *Ruddbot* aka Kevin Rudd. The irony is almost too much. But unfortunately the reality is more troubling than that, because, as we see it, Rudd is essentially a religiously devout conservative populist, who strategically manipulates the language of faith to control the way in which economic and cultural scenarios become morally obfuscated. He has often stated that he wants to make people's needs transparent, but ends up rendering these desires opaque through the heady mixture of narcissism and ideological doublespeak common to political life. Howlett, as one of Rudd's constituents, ensured that their carefully crafted and controlled images were at his mercy, and he was frankly none too

happy with the politician's game. It is, then, not surprising that the characters in *Homestead I* and *II* live in a glass prison for all to see and die in virtual splendour.

The other major body of work in *Flashbacks* was called *Frequencies*. Here Howlett reconfigured, or hardware hacked, iPod FM Transmitters and modified their capacity to receive and transmit information. Like his video and game works, this soundwork examined the logic of technology and its relationship to the construction and dissemination of meaning. Howlett carefully extracted and rearranged fragments of 'speech', specifically vocalised expressions that include moans, screams, grunts, groans, laughter, sighs, and silent gaps between words. These were transmitted as radio waves in an array of radio receivers in the installation. This generated a series of formless fragments in a soundtrack of transitory and sensuous grains of the voice, at once referencing the textures, timbres and affects of the corporeal, while at the same time highlighting the liminal nature of their origins. The radios also began to resemble glossolalia machines that displaced and disrupted the familiar narratives of the airwaves. As in other parts of *Flashbacks*, the work in *Frequencies* established another site for reconsidering the transformative potential of media, but one that emphasised poetic rather than social or political dimensions.

By highlighting how pervasive discursive practices complicate what is meaningful and meaningless, Howlett wants to make us aware of how these often-arbitrary judgments shape the particular ideological spaces in which we find ourselves. In his latest body of machinima work, including *Metropolis* (selected for the Queensland Premier's Digital Media Award in 2010), it could be argued that Howlett initiates scenes of *dissensus* in which he attempts to subvert the 'consensus' that determines conventional political, socio-economic and cultural logics. The idea of *dissensus* is linked to Jacques Rancière's call for a radical rethinking of aesthetic production and political ideas and how they are represented, made 'visible' or understood. He also examines how these ideas and images configure our 'subjectivisation', that is, how we are de-constituted to a degree within a 'proper' social order.

These are complex notions, but Rancière's idea of *dissensus* is briefly worth exploring in relation to Howlett's approach to art making, particularly his strategies of 'modding' and recontextualising conventional representational modes in popular screen-based media. *Dissensus* is based on a certain *impropriety* that challenges the hierarchies of visibility that are established through the notion of consensus, that is, what is designated proper and improper within aesthetic and political representations. *Dissensus* is based on a 'logic of equality that reveals the arbitrariness of that distribution for political participation and artistic practice'. It also aims to destabilise consensus in order 'to loosen the bonds'


HOWLETT CAN BE SEEN TO ENGAGE WITH THE REALPOLITIK OF THE EVERYDAY BECAUSE HIS PRACTICE TENDS TO DRAW AND REDRAW ART AND POLITICAL BOUNDARIES.

from top: **Metropolis Part 1: Machinima video still (totalitarian cityscape in Savanna)**, **2009/10**. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 8 minutes; **Metropolis Part 3: Machinima video still (middle class cityscape on fire)**, **2009/10**. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 8 minutes.

of the established hierarchy of representation and reconsider the importance of 'framing of the sensory world itself'. This means that *dissensus* becomes a way for understanding a 'certain reconfiguration of experience itself'. The idea of using *dissensus* as a form of resisting established order is not predicated so much on avant-gardist strategies of oppositional discourse or the collapsing of art into life, but rather on provoking alternative ways to consider how the 'boundaries defining certain practices as artistic or political are drawn and redrawn'.[5]
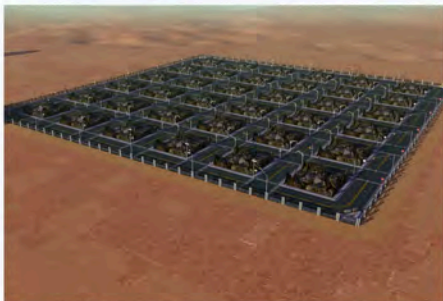
clockwise from top: **Metropolis Part 1-3, 2009/10**. Installation detail. Single channel, PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9. Queensland Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. Photography Carl Warner; **Metropolis Part 1: Machinima video still (totalitarian cityscape in Savanna), 2009/10**. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 8 minutes; **Metropolis Part 3: Machinima video still (middle class cityscape in pine forest), 2009/10**. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 8 minutes; **Metropolis Part 2: Machinima video still (upper class cityscape in desert), 2009/10**. PAL, HDTV, 1920 x 1080, 16:9, 8 minutes; **Metropolis Part 1: Machinima video still (totalitarian cityscape in Savanna)**.

formal devices for reading screen-based media, and for representing (and misrepresenting) reality. These spaces of representation become psychological zones that explore the public and personal realities of the stories we encounter in the work. And by reprogramming these virtual worlds Howlett interrupts their 'consensus', as it were, so as to make visible how the complicated aggregations and displacements of language, power and narrative operate across real social, cultural, political and economic lives. Indeed, his art alerts us to how we are subject to a carefully policed media simulated environment; and how this regime of representation needs to be regularly deconstructed by artists. Howlett also tends to play with his own artistic relationship with a consensual democracy that underpins what gets represented in aesthetics and politics.

It is also through the creative use of 'modding' that it could be argued that Howlett activates a 're-distribution' or reconsideration of how we view the hierarchies of representation through the technologies that entertain us and monitor our every movement. In this regard, Howlett challenges himself to 'modify' the coordinates of artistic and political practice so as to set in motion a re-conception of the consensus of representation that is established by the dominant social reality. This perspective does not assume any self-evident aesthetic or political outcome, but rather activates the process of 'reconstructing the relationship between places and identities, spectacles and gaze, proximities and distances' that is at the heart of *dissensus*.[6]

This reconfiguration of aesthetic and political representations is what drives Howlett's art practice, and like many other practices engaging with these challenges it will take some time to see how these works can 'loosen the bonds' of what appears 'evident and unquestionable'. ■

notes
1. Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 2009, pp.86-87.
2. Chris Handran, *Chris Howlett: Weapons On The Wall*, ex. cat., http://www.christopherhowlett.com/handran.html
3. Hal Foster, 'Arty Party', *London Review of Books*, Vol.25, No.23, 4 December, 2003, p.21.
4. M. Bittanti, 'All too urban: to live or Die in SimCity', in Atkins and Krzywinska, eds. *Videogame, Player, Text*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007, p.35.
5. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: on politics and aesthetics,* translated by Steven Corcoran, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2010, pp.2-3.
6. F. Carnevale, and J. Kelsey, 'Art of the Possible: An Interview with Jacques Rancière, *Artforum*, 45 (7), 2007, p.258.

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This is where Howlett can be seen to engage with the *realpolitik* of the everyday because his practice tends to draw and redraw art and political boundaries. His practice has for some time investigated the spaces between art and design, actual and virtual sites and political and aesthetic rhetoric. And these spaces have come together with greater coherency in his most recent explorations with machinima that bring several different and 'improper' worlds into the consensus of gaming world representations. In these exhibitions the viewer is presented with different